

# INTRICACIES OF MOPLAH UPRISINGS IN NINETEENTH - CENTURY MALABAR

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The Moplahs as a community had never collaborated with the British administration of Malabar, but resisted the alien rule. The British attempt to legitimize their conquest was challenged, their authority to rule was questioned and the ordering of society was disrupted. The colonial policies and programmes of the government were implemented through imperial institutions such as civil service, private property in land, law and law courts, police and jail. There was equality in principle but in practice the reforms were beneficial to the Hindus to the dismay of Moplahs.

The outbreaks which had cropped up in the nineteenth century Malabar were the creation of peasants, agricultural labourers, artisans, or petty traders and were pigeonholed by the British officials as Mappila outbreaks. The participation of people other than Muslims was generally absent and 'very limited in the revolt of 1921. Although Hindus were quite active in thefts and dacoities, collective action was confined to the *Mappilas*, the Muslim section of the population."<sup>1</sup> The official view is that "the history of *Moplah* outrages is a long one, they were known in the time of Tipu Sultan and in 1822, Mr Barber spoke of them as a disgrace to the Moplah community. These disturbances seem, however, to have been particularly the strife between the years 1836 and 1853. During a period of eighteen years, not less than twenty two outbreaks took place besides numerous abortive risings and conspiracies. Between 1855 and 1873 outbreaks still occurred but at longer intervals."<sup>2</sup> Because in 1854, it is specially mentioned that severe measures were put into practice in order to suppress the unrest and its outcome was far reaching.

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In the forty years between 1855 and 1894, there occurred only eleven notable outbreaks. To the common folk, to meet the two ends became a great enigma whether they were under the rule of Hindu Janmis or the foreigners. This article analyses the factors that precipitated the uprisings during the nineteenth century Malabar.

In Malabar two third of the revenue was derived from grain crop land and its location was mainly in Eranad, Valluvanad and Ponnani taluks of south Malabar. The overwhelming majority of Muslims at that time whether were cultivating tenants, landless labourers, fishermen or petty traders. Apart from their adherence to agriculture and petty trades, their occupations had two special features; first the very limited employment in government service and second, comparatively a large number were engaged in religious work. Employment opportunities under the government were not availed because of their lack of modern education. Above all most of them were tenant cultivators working under Hindu proprietors as Logan reported that "percentage of coolie cultivated class were doubly more numerous in Malabar than elsewhere in the presidency."<sup>3</sup>

Thus the British treated Janmis as the absolute owners of the land. The British government had not taken any effort in resurveying land as it was on the source of same assessment done by at the time of Mysore rulers. As a continuation of later appraisal, this system led to corruption by village officials, who were bribed to under assessed lands. Above all majority of the village Adhikaris belonged to high class Hindu families. They put the heavy burden of rent on the shoulders of poor peasants. Though reduction in the land revenue demand in Malabar was sanctioned by Graeme's proposals, (1818-1822), it was never executed properly. From 1819 to 1837 the hike of grain price in Malabar reached its high water mark, some 50% higher than that of 1800. Hike in grain price played a significant role in the resurrection of Janmis power in Malabar.

Most of the Muslims were landless tenants under Hindu Janmis. They were wage labourers or *Kuzhikanakars*. The Hindu landlords realised rents in higher rate and avoided the customary share of the produce. Hence without any other alternatives before the mighty power, they performed *Shahid*. These sacrifices indirectly inculcated a sense of religious spirit among the Muslim tenants and it ultimately resulted in the joining of more and more Muslims in this venture against the atrocities. This may be one of the reasons why most of the historians portray these uprisings as fanatic outbreaks.



After the outbreak of Mattannur in 1852, the government appointed a special commission under Mr. Strange. On 25 September 1852 Strange submitted a report to the government. It came in to effect on 23 August, 1853. According to his report all the persons engaged in the earlier 31 outbreaks were goaded by personal provocation and religious fanaticism. He proposed for a special legislation with the objects of escheating the property of those guilty of fanatic outrage, fining the districts where such outrage occur, deporting the suspected and placing restriction on the possession of arms, especially the war knives and the construction of mosques. All the suggestions except for the restriction of building mosques were sanctioned by the British. He further proposed the installation of a special police force with British officials only. However the Muslims showed their resent in most of the proposals put forward by Strange. His attention was particularly directed to the conduct of Said Fazal Pookoya Tangal and rigorous measures were implemented with reference to him. When we refer to the Tangal, it must be understood that all classes of the community regarded his word as command. He was strongly suspected by the British as the man behind all the issues and argued that he bestowed his blessings in performing jihad and shahid.

The implementation of T.L Strange's proposals followed by the expatriation of their renowned priest Syed Pookoya Tangal to Arabia created far reaching repercussions in the community. The main factor behind this deportation was the recommendation of Conolly, the Magistrate of Malabar. The government decision was prejudiced by his report and it is clear in the following words. "In the event of its being found necessary to apprehend the Tangal and his advisors, the government considers that it would be advisable to deport them altogether from Malabar to some other places."<sup>4</sup> As an immediate reaction to the deportation of the Tangal, the rioters planned the murder of Conolly. "Nine Amsams in connection with this outbreak were fined and the net proceeds of the fine aggregating nearly Rs. 3100/- had been granted to the wife of Conolly."<sup>5</sup>

The main recommendations made by Strange were carried in to effect. A special police was raised, and a despotic policy was trailed by passing of two Acts, i.e., Act xxiii and Act xxiv in 1854. The former authorised the local authorities to (i) Escheat the property of those guilty of fanatical rising. (ii) Fine the locality where such outrages had occurred (iii). Deport suspended persons out of the country, while the latter rendered illegal possession of the Mappila war knife. When measuring the frequency of outbreaks after and before 1854 the number and intensity of outbreaks dropped after 1854 when compared to the numbers



before 1854. So after the implementation of the Moplah Acts, the momentum of aggression diminished gradually.

When evaluated the general life of both the Hindus and Muslims, the former had no other source of income than agriculture. On the other hand, Moplahs engaged in that as well as every other field and were very keen on enterprising and preserving race. More over Hindu tenants were a disunited body. Above all their discrimination in worship kept a distance from the scope of a common gathering. Moplah peasants on the other hand were far better in the field of communication. They could gather for Friday congregation, shared their current grievances through the speeches followed by the prayer. Their calling for prayer was also utilised as a call for help at the time of disturbances. The over confidence in the power of their spiritual leaders Tangals also played a vital role in activating outbreaks. They believed that the Tangals had the capacity to change the cartridge in to cotton balls, which were shot out from the barrels of British guns.

However, the Muslims because of their peculiarity of belief showed a collective mind for their ground support. Hindus were reluctant to record their grievances. William Logan noticed in his enquiries that "before their eyes the fear of caste censure and fines and excommunications" loomed large. The Hindu peasantry was not only socio-economically but also religiously tied to their Janmis. The ideological world of Hindu peasantry thus grew stronger and subjected themselves to the land lords.

Another significant thing we have to point out that majority of the rioters was very young, between the age of 15 and 30 years. The Moplahs came to believe that if a poor man had been evicted from his land, it was religious merit to kill the land lord. As majority of the landlords in Malabar were Hindus, they were being attacked. According to them death at the hands of an infidel in the name of 'faith' was also a boon. This misinterpretation of Islamic principles had reflected in every outbreaks of 19<sup>th</sup> century Malabar. The performance of *Shahid* in order to attain paradise, were particularly alluring to the poor Muslims because of the hardships they experienced on the earth with famine and starvation. These meaningless sacrifices had continued throughout 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Muslim resistance in the form of colonialism had become stronger through the medium of literature. The glorious Quran itself justified such a way that "to fight for the cause of God against those who fight against you, but commit not the injustice of attacking them first. Verily the God loves not the unjust."<sup>6</sup> Under this contextual misinterpretation they showed their antagonism or resistance through numerous



literary scripts that had been circulated among the inhabitants as pamphlets. In order to attract the believers, most of these contained *fatwas* or warsongs. Some examples of such works are Thahrid-AhlilIman by ShaikhZainuddin senior, ThuhfathulMujahiddin by ShaikhZainuddin, FathulMubiyin by Qazi Muhammad etc.

There is no tradition of priest hood in Islam like that of Christianity and Hinduism, no caste, class, race or family which had special privileges. But the meddling of religious leaders in the affairs of the community is not a rare thing. These religious leaders played a prominent role in precipitating anti-imperialist sentiments through their preaching and writings. ZaidAlaviTangal and his son FazlPookoyaTangal are examples. The occasion on which the British suspected AlaviTangal was during the Cherurrevolt of 1843. An official report read “the strongest circumstantial evidence exists inthe circumstances connected with all former Moplah out breaks that this PookoyaTangal is in the habit, from motives which I need not specify, of directly sanctioning and giving his blessing (which these poor deluded wretches believe to be all efficacious) which horrid end lawless outrages and insurrections. They had occurred hitherto only within this priest’s country and had been penetrated only by his disciples.”<sup>7</sup>

Mosques played a prominent role in creating their cultural identity and of individual make up. In early days Muslims had to obtain official sanction to construct a mosque. Selling land for building mosques became an immediate reason for the agitations in many cases, because most of the land was belonged to the upper class Hindus. Most of the Hindus pledged their properties to temples. It is also mentioned in the report of Malabar Tenancy Committee that “virulent class distinction between the Hindus and Muhammadans will never be allayed so long as the latter are prevented by the former for the free exercise of their religious duties and one put great inconvenience to provide decent burial for their dead.”<sup>8</sup>The cases reported at Malappuram in 1851, at ParelAmsamin 1873, at Calicut in 1898 etc belonged to this category.

Moreover, their greed for land in the absence of alternate employment opportunities has to a large extent, inflamed fanaticism. An official report read “the fact of Janmi or landlord having in due course of law ejected from his land, a mortgage or other substantial tenant is a sufficient pretext to murder him and become *shahid* and so ensure the pleasure of the paradise.”<sup>9</sup>

The practice of landlords, who lock up and keep wasteland away from cultivation, squeezed the availability of land for farming. “The pressure of an ever



increasing population and limited area of land kept many at the base of subsistence level."<sup>10</sup> The company administrators also entertained the view that "the rich Muslims instigated the poor to set fanaticism in motion and gained great benefits from their action."<sup>11</sup> The case reported from Melathur Amsam on 10 September 1880, and one reported on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1896, belonged to this type of agitation. Moreover the British administration in both land and legal systems often turned against the policies of Muslims. The case reported in 1855 ended with the murder of British Magistrate Conolly who made instigation to implement the proposal of Strange was an example of uprising against the administrative policy of the British. Thus all most all cases their religious ideology fuelled the situation beyond expectations.

During the period of 1889-1915 "Moplahs showed themselves inclined to exploit the more constitutional methods for pressing their claims."<sup>12</sup> As a result, so many religious associations were founded in order to submit their grievances before the authorities and to uplift their social status by wiping out from age old customs through secular education.

In short the right of eviction and putting Melcharth were indiscriminately used against the Muslim tenant farmers. The rise in the price of paddy in the grain producing Taluks of Eranad, Valluvanad and Ponnani enfolded the Janmis and prompted them to oppress their tenants. The confiscation of arms, deportation, collective fining from poverty ridden Muslim families and Amsams, paved the way for further aggressions. The demolition of Mosques, persecution on religious grounds, deportation of their spiritual leader Said AlaviFazlTangal and implementation of Moplah Acts intensified their desire to end the alien rule forever. The idea or the thought of *shahid* became accepted and grew in popularity because it met the significant needs of the Muslim peasant community. Thus Moplah outbreaks of nineteenth century were the reflection of poverty under oppression.

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