



Local Functionaries and Imperial Control: Village Officials in the Peasant Struggles of Malabar, 1836–1921

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Abstract

Malabar was annexed by the British in 1792 and became a district of the Madras Presidency. The English East India Company ruled the district from 1792 to 1858. After that the district was under the direct control of the government of Britain. The administrative mechanism of Malabar, first under the English East India Company and then under the Government of Britain, was evolved through a 'trial and error process'. A key feature of the administrative experiments implemented by the British was the recruitment of loyal local inhabitants for service in various departments like revenue, police etc. Collection of maximum revenue was the most important aim of colonial government. To collect maximum income, revenue department was supported by the police and military. Village under Adhikari was the basic unit of administration in Malabar. Adhikari, the village officer, was assisted by menon, the accountant, and kolkaran, the executive assistant. The British supervised and controlled the villages of Malabar by using these three officials. The ordinary people, especially the peasants of Malabar looked these village functionaries as the representatives of the colonial government. The adhikari-menon-kolkaran trio was an important instrument of the British government to suppress the uprisings of the Mappila peasants of Malabar during 1836 – 1921.

Keywords: Adhikary, Menon, Kolkaran, Mappila, Amsam.



The British colonial government employed a range of calculated strategies to confront and suppress the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. As in many other instances of colonial rule, they relied heavily on local intermediaries and inhabitants to enforce their authority and maintain control. From the very beginning, whenever they faced a crisis, they relied on local-level surveillance mechanisms to identify, isolate, and defeat their enemies. They built up these surveillance systems by using loyal local inhabitants (*silbandis*). At the beginning, there was no scientific arrangement or order for this surveillance mechanism. But gradually the colonial government developed it as a perfect bureaucratic system. After the suppression of the revolt of 1857, the administration of English East India Company was ended in India. Then the Government of Britain directly ruled their territories in India. After 1858, the organisation of bureaucracy became more systematic. The village administrative system of Malabar also was developed as a part of this systematic organisation. There were three types of officials in Malabar villages- *Adhikari*, *Menon* and *Kolkaran*. The system of village administration in Malabar was distinctly different—not only from that of other Indian regions, but even from the administrative patterns within other districts of the Madras Presidency itself. The colonial government utilised this village officers-trio at its maximum during the time of the Malabar struggle of 1921. This article seeks to examine the role of village officers in the 1921 struggle and the attitude of the people towards them.

The Village Officer or the *Adhikari* was the representative of the colonial government in the Malabar villages.¹ He served as the civil judge, magistrate, head of the village police, and the officer in charge of revenue collection for the concerned villages. An officer called *Menon* assisted the *Adhikari* to keep the accounts of villages. Besides these two, there were two or three (depended upon the area of villages) *Kolkaran* (*Kolkars*) served as executive assistants of village officers. At the beginning of the nineteenth century itself, the English East India Company and later the British government used this *Adhikari-Menon-Kolkaran*-trio to suppress the protests of the native people against the exploitation of the colonial authorities.

Village Officials in the 18th Century

To augment its revenue, the Company established monopolies over key commodities such as salt, tobacco, and timber. These measures had a severe impact on the people of Malabar, particularly the Mappilas, who were deeply involved in the trade of these goods. K. N. Panikkar, quoting H. S. Graeme, notes that 6,348 tobacco cultivators became unemployed due to the monopolization of the tobacco



trade.² A similar situation prevailed in the case of other commodities as well. When the unemployed villagers attempted for secret trade, the Company prevented it by using local inhabitants who were loyal to them. Thus, the hills, mountains, forests, river banks, and sea coasts were conquered and controlled by the Company with the assistance of obedient and loyal native people. Gradually, in response to changing needs, they regulated this system of village administration and surveillance. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the village administration of Malabar had acquired a definite form and structure.

By the 1830s itself, the Mappilas of Malabar started protest against the exploitation of the English East India Company. After the Kurichya revolt of 1812, the most important challenge faced by the Company government in Malabar was the frequent protests of the Mappila peasants. The first of its kind was recorded at Pandallur in 1836.³ Between 1836 to 1852 more than 30 revolts of such nature were occurred at various places of Ernad, Walluvanad and Ponnani taluks. The Company government used police *Kolkars* under the tahsildars to suppress such rebellions. Considering the recommendations of T. L Strange, the government took measures to suppress the Mappila outbreaks.⁴ Act XXIII and Act XXIV of 1854 were introduced by the government as per the recommendations of the report of T L Strange. These Acts empowered the authorities to impose fines upon entire Mappilas of the villages where rebellions occur and prevented them from possessing arms. Officials were raided the houses of suspected Mappilas. Most of the officials in taluks and villages were Hindus.⁵ Naturally majority of the officials who raided the Mappila houses were also Hindus. This was one of the reasons for the enmity between Hindus and Muslims of Malabar. Many such incidents took place in the second half of the nineteenth century and the situation of the district worsened by the beginning of the twentieth century.

Changes in the 20th Century

By the beginning of the 20th century, as in other parts of India, Malabar too witnessed significant transformations in its social and political spheres. The mass agitation against the partition of Bengal and growth of militant organisations persuaded the British government to strengthen the surveillance mechanism and punitive measures. In Malabar, it gave village officials opportunities to interfere in the day-to-day life of the poor people of the villages. They looked the village officials as the agents of the colonial government. Popular discontent against the government naturally found expression in hostility toward village officials, who



stood as the most immediate and visible representatives of state authority.

Most of the Adhikaris and other two category officials of villages were Upper caste Hindus. The new enactments introduced by the government in the domains of marriage and inheritance significantly restructured the Namboothiri and Nayar family systems in Malabar. The joint-family and *taravad* system began to disappear. The heads of joint families (*taravad karanavars*) feared that they would lose the social status they had long enjoyed. After the completion of the revenue settlement, the landlords (*janmis*) recognised the need for collective bargaining, and organisations such as the Janmi Sabha were established. The court actions against the peasants became stronger. The changes in the social sector and the village reorganisation measures of the government caused for the decline of the position of village officials in the society. Many *amsams* (villages) of the nineteenth century were divided and the number of villages increased. Many new adhikaris (village officers) were appointed, and most of them were ignorant and illiterate. Compared to their predecessors, they did not possess much property.⁶ As they possessed neither property nor independent sources of income, they found it difficult to sustain themselves on the meagre salary provided by the government.⁷ So, they misused their power as the village head and munsiff to get more money. The *menons* and *kolkarans* also followed the same way to increase their income. This made them notorious among the poor people of Malabar villages.

The outbreak of the First World War further complicated the situation. The War, started in 1914, was a threat to the very existence of the British Empire. Britain needed more money and man power. Collection of 'war fund' and recruitment of native youths to the army was a challenge to British officials and their loyal native servants of India. In Malabar, the village 'official-trio' worked hard to meet their ends. They used harsh measures to collect money from the local inhabitants. It increased the discontent of the villagers towards these officers.

The war aggravated the plight of the peasants, especially the Mappila peasants, of Malabar. Trade and trade related jobs were adversely affected. Many people who worked at various places became jobless and returned to home. Most of them were Mappilas. The agricultural sector of the district could not accommodate them. Shortage of essential commodities and price rise were other hardships faced by the people. As there were no means of livelihood, many of them resorted to robbery. The reports of the district authorities prove that there was an exponential increase in the number of robbery cases in Malabar, especially in South Malabar.⁸ The entire army



was deployed in the war front. So, the maintenance of internal peace and security was the duty of the police force. But the strength of the police force at that time was not enough to meet the situation.⁹ Excessive workloads and low wages contributed to increasing harshness within the police force. As a result, the people came to view the police not as protectors, but as agents of persecution. Even before the outbreak of the war, the government, as part of its financial retrenchment measures, had closed several police stations in Malabar.¹⁰ Consequently, regular police patrols, which were earlier conducted at intervals with the assistance of village officials, largely ceased to take place. The duty of recording and reporting about crimes in villages became the duty of Adhikaris of villages. They did not perform their duties impartially. The *adhikaris* and their executive assistants often resorted to threats and coercion, pressuring complainants to withdraw their cases or accept their decisions. The decisions taken by *adhikaris* in most cases were in favour of *janmis* and other wealthy people. During the period of war, the government feared a small movement of protest. So, the surveillance system was stronger at that time. Village officials were an important instrument for identifying such seeds of protests. They conducted regular searches- secret and public- in their villages and submitted reports to the government. Many poor and innocent peasants and tenants were arrested, imprisoned, or deported on the basis of reports submitted by village officials. Naturally, the local inhabitants protested and, on many occasions, sought to take revenge against them.

National Consciousness among the Mappilas

The beginning of the First World War caused for the withdrawal of the Indian National Congress from active political agitations against the government. They thought that any political activity in British India at the time of war may endanger their goals about future India. Defeat of Britain in the war may cause for the emergence a more aggressive and imperialist powers like Germany. But the Home Rule Movement of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Annie Besant kept the political arena of Central and South India alive. The Home Rule League of Annie Besant extended its area of political activity to Malabar district also. The beginning of Home Rule Movement in Malabar marked the beginning of continuous political activities in the district.¹¹ K. P. Kesava Menon returned from England after completing his legal studies and became the secretary of both the Malabar Home Rule League and the Malabar District Congress Committee. In a meeting organised by the District Collector at Kozhikode, K.P Kesava Menon began to speak in Malayalam. But the British officials prevented it. Consequently, the entire leaders protested and quit



the meeting venue. The Home Rule League- Congress leaders of the district boldly protested against the autocratic attitudes of the British officials of the district. It inspired the ordinary people of the district.

Gandhiji's entry into the freedom struggle inflamed the anti-imperialist sentiments of the Indian people. The joint Non-Cooperation-Khilafat Movement gave a new face to the anti-British struggle across the country, with its ripples clearly visible in Malabar as well. Muslim national leaders such as the Ali Brothers, leaders of the Khilafat Movement, and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad began to influence the Mappilas of Malabar. The Manjeri Conference of 1920 was an example of the positive political attitude of the Mappilas. Out of more than one thousand participants in the conference, the majority were Mappilas. Mappilas from nearby places like Areacode came in processions to the conference ground.¹² Despite the opposition of Annie Besant and several other Congress leaders, two resolutions—one on the Khilafat issue and the other on administrative reforms—were passed at the conference with the strong support of the Mappilas. In protest against this assertive stance, Annie Besant and her associates boycotted the proceedings and withdrew from the conference. When Gandhiji and Moulana Shoukath Ali visited Kozhikkode as part of popularising the Khilafat-Non-cooperation movement more than 20,000 people were assembled at the town.¹³ The colonial authorities were provoked by the growing political activities in the district. They strengthened the regional surveillance system to prevent any possible outbreaks.

Struggle of 1921 and After

The Mappila uprising of 1921 constituted one of the most significant challenges faced by the colonial government in Malabar. It was primarily a movement led by the Mappilas of the region, particularly from the taluks of Ernad, Walluvanad, and Ponnani, directed against both imperial rule and the oppressive Janmi system. They raised the banner of protest against the colonial state and the Janmis, whom they held responsible for the hardships they had endured for decades.

The government utilised all available means to suppress the struggle. At the village level they deputed Amsam officials to collect information. They reported movements of the rebels to the district authorities without delay. A document informing the movement of the Mappila rebels through Peruvayal Amsam of Kozhikode district is available in the Regional Archives of Kozhikode.¹⁴ Hitchcock described the role of the Amsam Adhikari of Tennala and his Mappila assistants in safeguarding the house of a Nair chieftain (Kaprat Nair House) from rebel attacks.



Amsam Adhikaris escorted the police and army who marched to suppress the rebels at various remote and hilly areas of South Malabar.¹⁵ Their escort was essential for the movement of the police and army through the strange areas of the district. The rebels looked the Amsam officials as agents of the government.

The hostility of the rebels towards village officials resulted in numerous casualties across the district. Village officials and those who acted as agents of the government, landlords, and the police were targeted; they were threatened, killed, and had their properties looted or destroyed by the rebels. The police and *Adhikaris* who supported the government were targeted by the rebels. The caste or religion of such officials or agents of the state were not a matter of consideration to them. Many Mappila people were subjected for the attack of the rebels. The murder of Chekkutty Sahib, a retired Inspector of Police, was one such example. His brother, the Amsam Adhikari of Pandallur village near Manjeri, narrowly escaped from the rebels' attack.¹⁶ In October 1921, Mr. Lescher employed a local Mappila named Kottangodan Veeran as a guide for the army's movement from Vandoor to Areacode. As a result, his house was burned down by a group of rebels led by Kunhikoya Thangal of Perakamanna. In the same year, a Nair Kolkaran was killed at Marakara. Many Adhikaris, Menons, Kolkarans, and their families in the villages of Urangattiri and Muthuvallur in Ernad taluk were also subjected to attacks by the rebels.¹⁷

Village officials continued their harsh practices even after the 1921 revolt. Poor peasants who failed to pay their taxes on time were subjected to the destruction of their crops, and their livestock was seized.¹⁸ The colonial government remained highly vigilant about the growth of socialist and communist movements. The formation and activities of such organisations were closely monitored through the use of police forces and Amsam officials. Kolkarans in each village possessed intimate knowledge of the local population, enabling them to track developments and report them to higher authorities through the Village Officer. At the same time, a number of village officials resigned from their posts after 1921 and joined the national movement. However, the majority continued to support the colonial government, serving it as loyal and obedient agents until the end. This pattern was not unique to this region; across the world, imperialist powers relied on such local loyalist classes to sustain their rule. These loyalists were motivated not merely by government salaries, but also by the power and social status associated with their positions.



Endnotes

- 1 Government Order No. 1310, dated 14-06-1865.
- 2 K.N Panikkar *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar 1836-1921*, Oxford India Press, New Delhi, 2001, p.15.
- 3 Report of T. L Strange dated 25-10-1852, Madras Correspondence Files, Vol. 7341, Regional Archives Kozhikkode.
- 4 H.V Canolly, the District Collector of Malabar suggested the government to appoint a commission to enquire about the Mappila disturbances in Malabar. The government decided to accept the suggestion and appointed Mr. Thomas Lumsden Strange, popularly known as T.L Strange, as Special Commissioner to enquire about the disturbances.
- 5 Correspondence with the Special Commissioner Strange for March and April 1852 Vol. I, Madras Correspondence Files, Vol. 7376, Regional Archives, Kozhikkode.
- 6 Thalasseri Sub-Collectors Records, Bundle No. 145, Serial No. 23, p. 14, Regional Archives Kozhikkode.
- 7 The Average salary of *Adhikari* was 5-6 rupees per month. Most of them accepted the posts of *Adhikari*, *Menon* and *Kolkaran* by expecting the social recognition than the salary they received.
- 8 Report of R. H. Hitchcock, Police Superintendent of Malabar, dated 15-03-1915.
- 9 F. Rushbrook Williams, *India in the Year of 1917-18, Superintendent of Government Printing*, Calcutta, 1919, p.156.
- 10 In 1897, two police stations at Kalikavu and Karuvarakundu were stopped.
- 11 E.M.S, *Keralam Malayalikalude Mathrubhumi* (Mal.), Chintha Publishers, Thiruvananthapuram, 2009 (1948), p. 264.
- 12 K. Madhavan Nair, *Malabar Kalapam* (Mal.), Mathrubhumi Books, Kozhikkode, 2007 (1971), p.66.
- 13 *Ibid*, p.71
- 14 Andaman Colonisation Files, Bundle No.1, Serial No. 117.
- 15 R. H Hitchcock, *Peasant Revolt in Malabar: A History of the Malabar Rebellion, 1921*, Usha Publications, New Delhi, 1983, p.11.
- 16 *Ibid*, p. 63.
- 17 Andaman Colonisation Files, Bundle No. 376, 377, 473 and 474.
- 18 Mathrubhumi, 15 August 1936, NNPR, Tamil Nadu State Archives.