

## **The Malabar Moplah Rebellion 1920-22**

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### **Abstract**

*The Moplahs rebellion was started with the exploitative agrarian policies or systems adopted by the Britishers in Malabar taluqa of Madras Presidency. They created a class of landlords through these agrarian system in the form of 'Jenmis', who were predominantly Hindus, had two pronged programmes, one, is to extract as much as money possible in the form of agriculture revenue, and secondly, helping the Britishers in administering the Malabar taluqa. The system of revenue collection generated a long chain of intermediaries who were exploiting each other and finally burden falls on the last in the agrarian hierarchy i.e. the 'verumpattamdars'- the poor peasants, who were mostly Muslims Moplahs. These Moplahs were not finding any solution of their grievances within the existing system of governance and thus, fell into clutches of Muslim fundamentalism, became fanatic and aggressively violent both against the Britishers and their protégé, the jenmis. The British government rather than finding any solution resorted to severe repression.*

### **Introduction**

There were two streams of struggle were going parallel in the Indian scenario. First, the wave of anti-imperialist political movement against the Britishers, which was the prime concern of all political leaders irrespective of the party, and second, was the social and economic i.e. the wave of peasant's resistance against their oppressors, which existed before the advent of the British. The British system of revenue collection created a long chain of peasant hierarchies in Malabar district with varied and conflicting interests like the jenmis, kanamdars, verumpattamdars and the landless labourers. The jenmis, the rich peasants or a class of landlords, according to the British policy, was created to secure allies and important instrument for collection of revenue. These jenmis landlords backed by the police and law courts and the British revenue officials tightened their grip on the subordinate classes to extort more and more money in form of rent especially from the verumpattamdars, who constituted the most of the Moplah population,

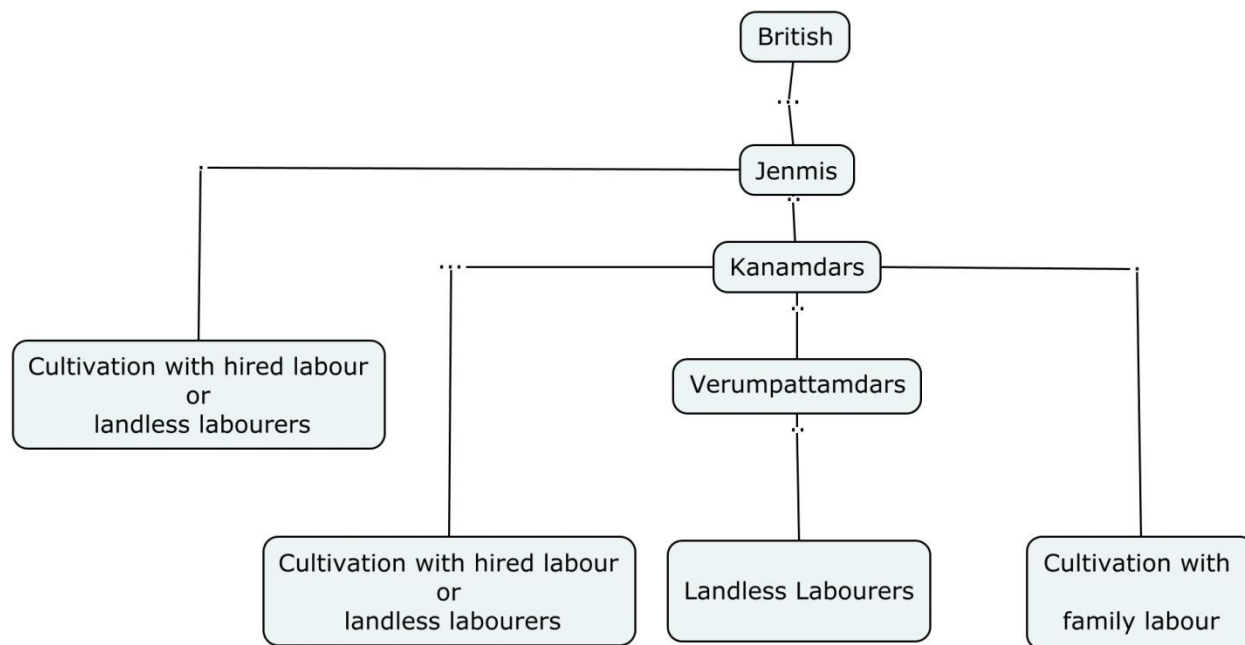
which in turn started to revolt against their oppressors. The large scale conversion of the Hindu population, especially the lower caste, cherumars further strengthen the base and spirit of the Moplahs. A series of outbreaks occurred in 1836, 1841, 1849, 1851 and 1852 in Malabar district. The government appointed various fact finding committees and commissions, first, in this process was in 1852 headed by T. L. Strange, to investigate the causes of these outbreaks. He found the origin of the riots was religious fanaticism not the agrarian discontent. The teachings of priests, particularly, the Mambram Thangal of Tirurangadi held responsible and was forced by the District Collector to leave Malabar, following the outrage of 1852. Strange recommended a repressive policy, enacted into law in the Moplah Outrages Acts, XXIII and XXIV of 1854, which empowered authorities to impose heavy fines on the Moplah populations in localities, where outrages occur; to confiscate the property of those found guilty of outrages; and to deport persons suspected of complicity. <sup>1</sup>Strange didn't recommend any redefinition of the land rights of the various classes. <sup>2</sup>The British land revenue system based on the concept of the jenmi as the master of the land, survived intact, and the theory of Moplah fanaticism continued. In response to an anonymous petition identifying eviction as the cause of Mappilla violence, William Logan, the District Collector, was appointed in 1888, as Special Commissioner, to inquire into land tenures and tenant rights in Malabar. After scrutinizing the 2200 petitions, 1876 came from the four southern taluqas (Ernaad, Walluvanad, Palghat and Ponnani) thus, he identified the epicenter of the uprisings and out of 3584 petitioners of southern taluqas 2608 (72 percent) were Moplahs. <sup>3</sup>Analysing these petitions Logan came to the conclusion that in Malayali custom jenmam had never implied an absolute proprietary rights to the soil and that the kanamdars, the verumpattamdars and the jenmi had all shared the net produce equally. <sup>4</sup>He also criticized the new law courts and the magistrate for their failure to assess the nature of land tenure and social structure in Malabar and for helping jenmis by enacting eviction decrees and sanctioning rent enhancement. During the period of 1862 to 1866 and 1877 to 1880, there was 244 percent increase in number of suits filed, where as the eviction decrees increased by 441 percent. Logan thus concluded that the evictions affected the Moplahs adversely and was the most important cause of their uprising. He made strong recommendations for tenurial security for middle man like kanamdars and also for verumpattamdars, who in the chain of sub-infeudation suffered

severely and recommended that there must be some legal checks on the landlord jenmis' power to oust tenants and increase rents.<sup>5</sup> But, the Government of Madras was neither persuaded by his theoretical arguments nor moved to provide security of tenure for those who tilled the soil.<sup>6</sup> And appointed another committee in 1885, Malabar land tenures committee which in its recommendations asked for a legislation to provide compensation (in case of eviction) for tenants improvements on lands. But surprisingly, it didn't speak a single word for occupancy rights of the tenants and actual cultivators.<sup>7</sup> This report definitely buried the monumental work or recommendations of William Logan.

### **Agrarian Hierarchies**

When the British East India Company took control over the Malabar in 1792, it recognized the absolute proprietary rights of 'jenmies' in land and the 'kanamdars' and the 'verumpattamdars' as mere leaseholders liable to be evicted at expiry of their lease. The janmies, were mostly Nambudiri Brahmins, which were at the top of social as well as agrarian hierarchy in the Malabar society; next in the hierarchy were the kanamdars, were disproportionately Nairs, who held lands on favorable leasehold terms, were a privileged section; next were the verumpattamdars, tenants-at will, were overwhelmingly drawn from the Mappilla community and from the Tiyyas, Cherumars, Mukkvan and other depressed Hindu classes. The 'jenmis' leased out land to 'kanamdars' for cultivation, retaining only a small portion as personal farms to be cultivated by bonded labourers (slaves), the kanamdars, the middleman in the hierarchy, sometimes cultivate part of land with their own family labour and partly leased to the next, 'the verumpattamdars' or cultivate through the hired labourers under their personal supervision. The Verumpattamdars held year to year lease of small plots of land either directly from the jenmies or from the kanamdars. Just like the Nyars and the Tiyars, some Moplas were kanamdars also, but the great majority in southern Malabar was poor peasants and landless labourers. Land grants were hereditary and implied customary sharing of the produce between the jenmis and those other classes below him. Most of the kanamdars came from the educated middle class and held bureaucratic positions (particularly after the arrival of the

British).



### Socio-Religious Issues

The several tiered social structure in which the Nambudiri Brahmans at the top and the cherumars, Pulayas and Parayas etc. at the bottom, was great challenge to the social harmony in the Malabar society. The Slavery Abolition Act 1843, made the condition of the cherumars bad to worse. This act stopped the slave traffic and now the cherumars were deprived of whatever the economic gains, they had made from this trade, and now were forced to involve in permanent bondage of higher castes.<sup>8</sup> Conversion offered charumars a great opportunity to free themselves from the oppression of jenmi landlords and to attain some social status. For Moplahs, each new convert improved their collective strength and act as an instrument to paralyse cultivation of the jenmis farms, thereby making the bargaining position of jenmis weaker with comparison to Moplah lease holders. Since 1831 Mohammadan population in Malabar increased manifold, it was 269,624 in 1831 to 382,330 by 1851 and around 1901 it was already 900,000 mark, where as the population of the cherumars decreased rapidly after 1860. In the 1871 census, the numbered 99,009 and by 1881, it had fallen to 64,725.<sup>9</sup> In Muslim society there also noticed some remarkable changes, the mosques and the Thangals (Moplah priests) were acquired more prominence. At a madrassah in Ponnani, the head of the school selected the

most diligent students and conferred on them the titles Thangal, Musaliar, Kazi and so on. The Thangals at the top of the religious hierarchy not only preached in the mosques but with changed circumstances acquired a new role of combining their religious functions with worldly interests of the community. A mosque was now an ideal place for both mass meetings and religious congregations, and the distinction between the two gradually blurred as the source of livelihood of the Moplahs peasantry was increasingly threatened by legal evictions.<sup>10</sup> All the Moplahs killed in the uprisings were held in the deepest reverence as martyrs, and all those mosques and places where such incidents occurred became prominent places of pilgrimage.<sup>11</sup> The Moplahs' low state of intelligence, the subservience in which they had hitherto lived, and the absence of any men of learning to instruct them in their new religion, even were they capable of understanding, all tended to provide a race which would prove an easy prey to fanaticism and lawlessness.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Plight of Moplahs**

The southern taluqa (Ernaad, Walluvanad and Ponnani) of the Malabar district constituted more than 60 percent of the Moplah population which were agriculturist, illiterate and unskilled, Over 18 percent of the total Moplah population were traders and merchants.<sup>13</sup> The Muslim tradition of universal brotherhood consolidated the entire Muslim community despite having occupational and economic differences within them. Another peculiar feature which organized the different sections of the Moplahs was due to the influence of the Thangals. But the Logan inquiry reports regarding compensation for tenants' betterment divided them. Another social factor which parted their ways was that the Moplahs in the town and cities were progressive in nature, they imparted western education to their children and compete with the Hindus not only for jobs in the government sector but also in trading and commercial enterprises. While acquiring the opportunities they were vocal in criticizing the violent rebellious tendencies of their co-religiousists to prove loyalty towards the British.<sup>14</sup> These progressive Moplahs were well organized through the 'Moplah sabha' (Himayath-ul-Islam sabha), which however, included all sections of the community, irrespective of economic and social status but dominated by the affluent Moplahs, which were against the interests of the poor peasant- the verumpattandars.<sup>15</sup> The main motto of this organization was the development of the

community, occasionally they raised the issue of the plight of the verumpattamdars Moplahs but at the same time discouraged the violent outbreaks of rebellious Moplahs.<sup>16</sup> Another important Moplah organization was, the 'Mannath Sabha' , came in existence in 1900 at Ponnani, whose prime concern was to broaden the sphere of Moplah preacher and speed up the process of conversions. Again, it was an opportunistic in nature and interested in strengthening the position of Thangals, Qazis and other religious leaders.<sup>17</sup> All these organizations were actually interested in their positioning in regional or national politics on the basis of numerical strength of the Moplah community as a whole. Thus, community of Malabar Moplahs remained isolated from the rest of Muslim community of the Madras presidency and their social, cultural and economic interests are different, that could be seen in a call from the Indian National Congress, when the progressive Madras Presidency Muslims opposed it and the Malabar Moplahs supported it.<sup>18</sup> In the Malabar politics too, the verumpattamdars as a class remained aloof from the mainstream. This is because of the fact that when we the proceedings of the first Malabar District conference at Palaghat in 1916, it emphasized the permanency of jenmam rights and didn't utter a single word for evictions, rack-renting and lack of tenurial security. In the same manner, the leadership comprising elitist Moplahs restricted the Moplah masses (especially the poor peasantry- the verumpattamdars) in becoming the part of national politics.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the revenue staff in collusion with the landlord jenmis tempered with deeds and contracts in the best interests of the landlords and thereby made their own fortune. Again, with the support of legal system each superior right holder could extract a larger share than previously from the immediate subordinate in the chain of sub-infeudation, and the worst sufferers were the verumpattamdars and the landless labourers whether Moplah or Hindu. All the above factors led the poor peasantry to the rebellion.<sup>20</sup>

### **Incidents of the Rebellion**

The agrarian issues were firmly rooted in the atmosphere of the Malabar soil and the two political movements (Non-Cooperation, Khilafat) further provided an impetus to the already charged environment. In the agricultural hierarchy of Malabar, the kanamdars- the middle class peasants, first, making use of the situation started a tenancy movement in this area over fixation of tenures, with a genuine plea that in the suburb of the Malabar taluqa, the Travancore and

Cochin in 1867 and 1914, respectively conferred these rights over the kanamdars.<sup>21</sup> The epicenter of this movement was in north of the Malabar at Calicut but the great intensity felt at southern parts. The tenancy association of the kanamdars organized itself by meetings, protests and in some areas even boycotted the jenmi landlords by refusing to pay rents of the lands vacated by the evicted tenants.<sup>22</sup> The Non-cooperation was started in August 1920 and on the 18th of that month, Gandhi and Shaukat Ali, visited Calicut to bring the message of non-cooperation and the Khilafat to the people of Malabar. In his speech before a crowd of 20,000, Gandhi proclaimed that 'the Imperial Government has knowingly flouted religious sentiments dearly cherished by the 70 million Mussalmans. If the Mussalmans of India offer non-cooperation to Government in order to secure justice on the Khilafat, it is the duty of every Hindu to cooperate with their Moslem brethren. Khilafat Committee, consisting of both Muslims and Hindus had been formed in Malabar in June'.<sup>23</sup> Thus, responding to the Gandhi's ideals and exhorted by the Mahadum Thangal of Ponnani, in 1921 at Calicut, number of Moplahs resigned official posts, stepped down from the bar, and dropped British titles, and pressure was exerted on others to do likewise. The courts and government schools were widely boycotted, under the auspices of the local Khilafat Committee.<sup>24</sup> There were rumors in the Malabar district that the government is coming with some agrarian reforms, landlords increasingly evicted tenants in the 'resumption' of lands for their own cultivation. Due to this act of the jenmi landlords, the agrarian situation got worsened. All the associations, the tenancy league, the Congress and the Khilafat committee made use of this situation and in February 1921 leaders of the Congress in Calicut, K. Madhavan Nair, U. Gopala Menon and Moideen Koyai invited Yakub Hassan, prominent Muslim leader in Madras, to Malabar for his address. The District Collector felt concern and imposed a ban on the Khilafat meetings contemplated for Ernad. In July 1921, two events further ignited the Moplah masses, first, there arose a dispute between the Nilambar Raja - a Nambudiri Brahman and a Khilafat activist Moplah in Tirurangadi village, thousand of Moplahs gathered in protest.<sup>25</sup> Second, was the rumour, that rekindled the spirit of the Moplah that the Mambram Mosque headquarter of the Mambram Thangal, a major centre of religious activities in various rebellions had been attacked and razed to the ground.<sup>26</sup> About 2,000 Moplahs from neighbouring villages thronged the

Tirurangadi from the west. The collector first tried to disperse the mob through dialogue but failed, the police authorities bowed down the Moplahs with nine casualties. In another incident, the Moplah mob estimated at 25000, attacked police and troops surrounding the village Tirurangadi. They were too dealt harshly but the violent mob mutilated the bodies of two British officers. After more aggravation, the District Collector E.F. Thomas, on 20, August 1921, accompanied by a contingent of police and troops crushed the movement with cruelty and was designated as 'the Dyer of Malabar'.<sup>27</sup> However, the moderate press criticized the Moplah violence, but also condemned the excessive and indiscriminate firing by the troops. The taluqas of Ernad and Walluvanad had fallen under the control of Moplahs rebels and proclaimed the end of British rule and the advent of Swaraj. Ali Musaliar of Tirurangadi assumed the title of 'Ali Raji' in a ceremony at the Jammatt mosque in Ponnani, which was the central mosque of Moplahs religious organization. Seethi Koya Thangal of Kumaranpathor, set himself up as 'King of Mannarghat. Another important figure was Variakunnath Kunjahammed Haji, joined the Khilafat agitation and became unquestioned leader of the movement. On August 22, 1921 Kunja- Ahmmmed Haji, declared himself as Khilafat King and took control over Ernad and Walluvanad talukas, advised the warring Moplahs to establish harmony with Hindu verumpattamdars. But the irresponsible mob under the leadership of the Chembrasser Tangal, in Ernad locality, cut the throats of many Hindus and thrown into a well.<sup>28</sup> In Ernad and Walluvanad, the condition was more tragic; the government offices were burnt and looted. A mob of 10000 in the village Tirur burnt down police station and deserted the famous Trikandayar Hindu temple. On August 25, the Governor-General of India imposed martial law in the taluks of Calicut, Ernad, Walluvanad, Ponnani and later extended it to Kurambranad and Wynaad taluks.<sup>29</sup> The government forces met with stiff challenge from erring Moplahs at village Pukkottur, in the suburb of Malappuram, but after five hours of fighting were subdued, their casualties being estimated at four hundred killed.<sup>30</sup> Soon, after the arrival of reinforcements from Bangalore, the villages Malappuram, Tirur, and Tirurangadi- the center of the Moplah rising, were surrounded and after failure of any settlement, encountered the aggressive Moplahs, which resulted in killing of twenty four and thirty surrendered, including Ali Musaliar, who was later tried and hanged to death.<sup>31</sup> The government forces misused the special powers



under the Martial Law and adopted the policy of genocide, in a incident, while transferring the captured Moplahs in a closed railway van, 70 died of asphyxiation.<sup>32</sup> After this severe repression in November, various villages soon submitted petitions of surrender. The Government offered generous terms and conditions (amnesty for persons not guilty of grave crimes or violence) for surrender and result of this, a large scale surrender was reported.<sup>33</sup> Later, the Chembrasserri Thangal and Seethi Koya Thangal were forced to surrender in December to the Gurkha Rifles. The execution of Variakunnath Kunjahammed Haji on January 20, 1922, marked the end of the rebellion.<sup>34</sup> In February 25, 1922, the Governor-General lifted the Martial Law and the local administration resumed the powers for the restoration and maintenance of order.<sup>35</sup> In an official record 2339 rebels were killed, 1652 wounded, 5955 captured and an additional 39,348 rebels surrendered voluntarily during the later stages of the rebellion. However, General J. T. Burnett-Stuart estimated the rebel deaths at between three and four thousand.<sup>36</sup> As far as the Government losses are concerned, 43 killed (including 5 British officers), and 126 wounded.<sup>37</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The movement was started under the aegis of the Malabar Tenants' Association, which comprised the middle peasants, the kanamdars, the poor peasants, the verumpattamdars and the landless labourers. The class of kanamdars initially led this movement on the issue of fixity of tenurial rights, which suited the all sections of erring peasants. But the local leadership failed to muster the wholehearted support of the Hindu peasantry because of the fact that the Khilafat issue overpowered over the other issues like swaraj and non-cooperation. It was a failure of the organisational skill of the leadership because it couldn't develop a mature second line leadership and after the arrest of main leaders like K. Madhvan Nair, P. Moyden Koya and Yakub Hasan, the movement passed in the hands of local Muslim clergy which completely isolated the Hindu peasantry due to their provocative gestures and thus the manifestation of the revolutionary potential of the disgruntled peasantry couldn't proceed towards class conflict but enmeshed in ethnic-religious proposition. The Muslim cultural and religious traditions like congregational prayers, common feasts, dinners and concept of equality and universal brotherhood, definitely helped in consolidating the backward Muslim Moplah population but

imparted a big dent in the class consciousness of various sections of the peasantry. The verumpattamdars, as a class, despite having great potential not only in countering the oppression but also in altering the exploitative revenue system, under the impression of fanaticism lost sight and vision. The land revenue system envisaged by the British was planned so intelligently that first, they ensured the smooth collection of maximum revenue and secondly, they created a permanent rift in the agrarian hierarchies. Now the verumpattamdars, the poor peasants had to fight simultaneous both against the jenmi-kanamdars and the British government. The middle peasant kanamdars were also not in harmony with the landlord jenmis because of their semi-permanent nature of land tenure and increase in rate of lease renewal fees. But soon they parted away from the movement. Hamza Alavi, a western sociologist is quite right in his assertion that the middle peasants' have potential to initiate and lead the movement but when the peasant movement actually advances towards its revolutionary objectives they tend to move away from their core position in the organization of the movement. Another sociologist Eric Wolf's assertion proved right in the Malabar riots, that their conservative outlook and radical actions remain only to preserve the status quo. Hence, the nature of their participation is opportunistic not transformative. The movement in its initial phase was purely based on agricultural questions like a age long exploitation of the poor peasant, the verumpattamdars. The British government openly supported the landlords in both ways, through their administrative and judicial system and in severely curbing the movement despite the repeated recommendations of the committees and commissions for improvement in land tenure system. The rank and file of the movement came from the illiterate, backward, isolated and frustrated Moplahs, who couldn't find any outlet of their grievances either from their own agricultural and social hierarchies and or from the British system of governance, so they easily prey in the hands of fanatic's zone and had to depend on the crutches of religious fundamentalism. They also couldn't win the confidence of the northern fellow Moplahs because the southern Moplahs were mostly converted from lower castes of cherumars and tiyyas who had some socio-cultural difference with the northern Moplahs, who were converted from socially and economically better ranked status of nayyars. The great bulk of the population in the northern part came from the peasant proprietors, being both landlords and tenants at the

same time. Apart from these, the revolutionary peasants couldn't develop their own leadership in the movement which could guide them genuinely, especially in collaboration with the other peasant hierarchies. The ongoing non-cooperation and khilafat movement definitely accelerated the speed and strengthened the spirit of the Moplahs but the movement had its own way of ideology, programme and tactics. However, the Khilafat issue heightened the already existed religious fundamental spirit. Hence the isolated directionless Moplahs bereft of any able leadership crushed by severe inhuman powerful regime.

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