

Mappila Labourers and the Plantations of Malabar: A Colonial Experience

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Plantations were a product of colonialism. Commercialization of agriculture gave way for the emergence of plantations all over the world. In the agrarian sector introduction of plantation and commercial agriculture created demand for agricultural labourers who would be relatively free from the feudal obligations of wetland agriculture mediated by the traditional relations of production.¹The earliest foreign investment in the region had been in spice plantations begun by Murdoch Brown in Anjarakandy near Tellicherry. After defeating Pazhassi Raja, Wayanad came under the control of British rule. In Wayanad, Coffee plantations were started first then followed by tea plantation. In the late nineteenth century investments were made in the cool, well watered Western Ghats, which had easy access to ocean transport. This region was highly suitable for tea and rubber plantations. Permanent supply of labour was an integral part of plantation industry. Mappila labourers were an integral part of plantations of Malabar. This paper tries to locate the mappilas as labourers and also as rebels in the plantations of Malabar during the colonial period.

Mappila Muslims of Malabar was a community that arose as a result of the interactions and engagements between the Islamic Arab traders and coastal communities of western coast of India.² Before the arrival of European trade on the western coast of India in 1490 muslim merchants had stimulated a brisk trade with the local princes in the Malabar coast and also with a network of traders from

the Middle East and the eastern coast of Africa.³ The fragmented character of a Malabar polity with a large number of principalities enabled the Portuguese to establish a control in the coastal regions and impose their system of maritime control. The political and economic interests of the Portuguese on the Malabar Coast brought several concerns to both the ruler Zamorin and Mappila merchants of Calicut. Mappilas considered them as a threat to their political, economic, and commercial interests in the region.⁴The early decades of the sixteenth century witnessed the conflict between the Portuguese and Muslims, that resulted in the economic marginalization and gradual withdrawal of the latter into the interior of Malabar.⁵

While Malabar came under the British rule and the introduction of new revenue settlements had far reaching consequences on the Mappila muslims of Kerala.⁶The economic burden on the peasantry stemmed from the exploitation by the colonial state as well as by the landlords.⁷The oppression and exploitation by the landlords were more intensely felt upon on peasantry. The enhancement of rent, eviction, *melcharths*, (overlease) and imposition of renewal fees were the common methods of oppression and exploitation.⁸ Rent collected by the landlords and intermediaries had substantially increased. In traditional system as well as in the early British settlements the cultivator was earmarked one-third of the net produce, but by the beginning of the twentieth century his share had gone down to 2 to 12 per cent.⁹Renewal of lease led to increase of rent and the burden of which was upon the actual cultivator. His condition becomes worse than a labourer.

Mappilia peasantry of south Malabar rose repeatedly in revolt against this exploitation in the 19th century itself. Mappilas were mainly converts to Islam from the lower castes like Tiyya, Cheruma and Mukkuvu and a small number of descendants of Arab traders. A substantial section of them, particularly in the Eranad, Walluvanad and Ponnani taluks were 'wretchedly poor' peasants and agricultural labourers, while the landlords were mostly Nambudiris and Nairs.¹⁰

Mapilas of Malabar were connected with the plantation industry ever since its establishment at Anjarakkandy. The principal

agent was Assin Ally, a person secretly employed by Brown to supply constant demand for slaves and specially children to work in the plantations. From the evidence of the children themselves, which was taken by Baber who was the District Magistrate of Malabar in 1812, it appeared, that they were stolen from their relatives in the night time; cloths were thrust into their mouth, and in this state they were carried to Allepi, where Assian Ally resided; thence they were sent off by water to Mahee. In order to prevent their being detected, they were all disguised as Mapla children, the boys were deprived even of their *koodeema* or lock of hair and Mappila names were given.¹¹ From the investigation made by Baber, judge and Magistrate, North Malabar revealed that on Brown's Plantation, 76 men, women and children all of whom declared that they had been stolen or forcibly carried away by Maplas and others from the districts of South Malabar, Cochin and Travancore and, transported to Mr. Brown's Plantation at Anjarakandy.¹²

The plantation workers were chiefly drawn from among the outcastes, tribal groups and other depressed communities like the *adi-Dravidas/Karnatakars, Vaniyas, Pulayas, Cherumas, Ezhavas/Thiyyas*, etc. who were beyond the pale of the *chathurvarnya* – broadly dalits and backward communities; they also included 'half-starved *Mappilas* and also converted Christianities.¹³ Labourers of Malabar were encouraged to emigrate overseas in plantations and other ventures where they were free of caste discrimination.¹⁴ The possibility of migration gave cultivators a relative degree of independence and blunted, to an extent, the authority exercised by large landowners.¹⁵ Short-term migrants from Malabar provided most of the labour for the plantations in Coorg to the North.¹⁶ After cultivating the fields before the onset of monsoons in July-August, labourers would leave for the plantations, returning home just before the harvest in September.¹⁷ Royal Commission on labour in 1931 also point out that the intense caste oppression suffered by the lower caste people of Madras Presidency also become the reason for the forced migration to the plantation becoming an easier task.¹⁸

As regards emigration Sir Henry Winterbotham wrote in 1896 "It is devoutly to be wished that some plan of State aided emigrations

could be devised, which would tempt a few thousands of Ernad jungle Mappillas to emigrate. A good many of the coast Mappillas have found their way to Ceylon and Rangoon; but a few, if any, of the inland Mappillas look further afield than to seek a temporary job at the Kolar Mines, or on the coffee estates in the Wynaad. . . . The mappila makes a tough, hardworking, sober, useful coolie, whose advent, would probably be welcomed in the Straits Settlements, Penang and Burma: but among his virtues is one which militates against emigration, viz., a warm love of his native country, home and family". And all this holds good today though to the Kolar Gold Fields and the Wynaad coffee estates should now be added the Travancore, Cochin and Malabar Rubber estates.¹⁹ Mappilas who had revolted against their landlords and the colonial Government sought work in the plantations colonial government encouraged them. Having heard about the availability of uncultivated land in Malabar from the Mappila labourers who worked in the plantations of Travancore, the first wave of migrants started their journey to Malabar.²⁰ From 1846 coffee planters in the Wynaad were dependent upon the labourers from the Ernad taluk of Malabar, from Coimbatore and Salem districts, and from Mysore state to open their estates.²¹

During the nineteenth century coffee and tea plantations of Wyanad depended mainly labourers from outside.²² In 1877 thirty-thousand Mysore coolies were employed in Wyanad alone. It was due to the great famine of 1876-77. But following years faced the scarcity of labour from Mysore. Local labour was insufficient for maintaining the planting industry and that except in three cases such as Salem, Madura and Tinnevely, planters in all the districts of Southern India were compelled to import the bulk of their labour from a distance. Another factor effected the supply of labour for plantations in Southern India was that considerable emigration took place every year from Madras Presidency to other parts of India and to Mauritius, Natal, the Straits Settlements, Burma and Ceylon. The superintendent of Police in Malabar, had given oral evidence that mortality on the road among coolies returning to Malabar from Coorg was 'fearful.' South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee reported that the figure 109 destitute persons have picked up from the road dead or in such a condition

shows that the figure represents a very small percentage of the number of Malabar coolies employed on estates outside their own district. In the rubber plantations in Ernad, Mappilas formed a majority of workers. Muslim women also worked in the plantation. For every 1000 muslim workers there were 329 women labourers.²³ Nilambur teak plantation which was started by East India Company on 1844, also required large number of labourers. "In Nilambur plantation 200 coolies a day were considered necessary to ensure the prompt and proper execution of the work. On this basis, the labour force required for regeneration, tending and cutting down depended on the extent of land annually converted into plantations. They kept a labour force of 500 coolies.²⁴ Additional labour force was obtained from local sources, partly from other parts of Ernad and Walluvanad taluks and partly from South Canara.²⁵

Labour investigation Committee of 1946 has reported that regarding the source of labour supply, the whole of the labour employed in the plantations comes from south India. In Mysore, Coorg, parts of Malabar and the Nilgiris, Cochin and Travancore, a certain amount of the labour employed was strictly local, residing in adjoining villages and comes to work on the estate each day. Such labour played a significant role in rubber plantations. Resident labour was recruited from three linguistic areas Tamil, Malayalam, and Canarese. The Mappilas the Malabar district have been the perennial source of recruitment for rubber tapping.²⁶ Rege committee reported that in 1944 nearly 65 percent of labourers of Wayanad was from Malabar. Labourers from Malabar also worked in the plantations like Coorg and Nilgiri, Central Travancore, South Travancore, Mysore. In Malabar a substantial number of Mappilas were employed on both tea and rubber estates.²⁷ Regarding the character of labourers Rege committee reported, except the workers from Mysore and some of the Malayalee labour, most workers were drawn from the landless agricultural working classes. The Tamil workers were hard-working but not clean in their habits, while the Malayalees were clean but were not fond of hard work and were generally spendthrifts. The Canarese were a thrifty hardworking people where the Mohla was less thrifty and more irregular in attendance.²⁸

Kanganis or Maistries were middle men appointed by planters for recruiting labourers from villages. The professional labour supplier as a recruiting agent was employed by coffee estates of Mysore, Coorg and Wynaad and by many of the rubber estates in South Travancore, North Travancore and Malabar.²⁹ These suppliers were rich and influential landlords. They recruited persons from village and even from outside their villages. They deputed assistants to recruit labour. These assistants were known as sub-‘kanganies’ or ‘kole-mastries’. They supervised the work of labourers.

In the internal establishments in tea, coffee and rubber plantations vary. Coffee and rubber estates generally not needed an elaborate supervisory staff as like tea estate. Rubber and coffee estates not employed workers in such a large numbers as tea. There existed a head conductor in charge of each division and under field conductors in charge of different fields. Under the field conductor there were maistries under field conductors. Maistries supervised the work of the labourers. In the rubber plantations of Malabar, men were recruited, as a rule they do not as a rule bring their families with them. Such works were done by women in rubber estates largely done by local labour. The chief work in rubber estates were weeding manuring and spraying to prevent fungus disease. The harvesting process is called tapping. Majority of the women workers’ day starts even before sunrise at 4 or 5 a.m. she had to get up and cook meals for the family before going out to work by 6 or 7 a.m. Most of them had to clean the house and set about the task of preparing the meal.³⁰ Kadheesumma, retired female labourer of Pullangode estates, recollect her memory “we used to bring with us *kanji* (Rice gruel) and dry fish for the noon meal and jaggrey for the tea that will be prepared in the estate. While working we enjoy and share our family matters and in the presence of *mastri* we were not supposed to chat. We fear estate authorities, in front of them nobody will make any sound.³¹

There were two systems of wage payment in the plantations, time-rate and piece-rate. The work of harvesting such as plucking of tea was paid for on a piece-rate basis while other works such as weeding and pruning were paid on a time-rate basis. Planters during their initial stage gave the labourers higher wages when compared to

the workers from plains. It was to attract them to the newly formed plantations. During 1880s the tea plantations in Wayanad, Nilgiri and Thiruvithamkur paid four annas to four annas six paise.³² Men, women and children were given different wages. Tea plantations always preferred women labourers. The low wages paid to the women labourers had a bad effect on the family earnings. During 1920s the post world war situation worsened the situation of labourers. The wage rate on Plantations, six annas on an average- was lower than what the agricultural labourers received in the low lands.³³

The Mappila rebellions of mid nineteenth century in its culmination in 1921 had its consequences in the plantation region also. It was a massive show of defiance against the gross inequalities in agrarian relations sustained by the Hindu landlords and legitimized by the British Crown. The *Khilafat* movement – an attempt at moulding a pan-Indian Islam identity among the Muslims of India who were otherwise segregated along linguistic, cultural and social lines-gave a boost to the Mappila revolt.³⁴ The European planters and managers on the tea and rubber estates often came under attack from the rebel mappilas. On one occasion, a European manager on the Poonoor estate in Tamarasseri was stripped of his own clothes and then released wearing only an ordinary cloth used by Hindus. The rebels resorted to varying forms of violence which at times stretched to murder. The telegram message sent by Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India in 1921: On 25th Mappilas attacked Punur Estate and attempted life of Tippetts' Manager who has miraculous escape. Mob murdered Eaton of Pullengoda Estate and burnt bungalow. Mr. Eaton safe, Kerala Rubber Estate reported attacked; bungalows, factory, dispensary burnt and cash and property looted. Managers believed to have escaped. Another telegram sent on the same day reads, 'Emergency issue arms, ammunition to Planter units. Auxiliary Force being ordered'. The planters of Malabar were very much conscious of the circumstances prevailed in Malabar.³⁵

A detailed account of the occurrence is recounted by Madavan Nair.³⁶ Most cruel incident related to the beginning of Malabar rebellion was that happened at Pullangoda Rubber plantation. Among the Mappilas of Eranad, the people living in Kalikavu, Karuvarekkundu

and Chembrassery were more illiterate, superstitious and fanatic. Majority of the Muslims were employees of rubber plantations of Pullangoda and Kerala estates. Khilafat issue was strong among these men who were ready to sacrifice their life even for an insignificant matter. Congress had already formed a Khilafat committee there but failed to discuss about the significance of non violent non cooperation struggle. Within a limited span of time the membership of the committee increased. It was reported that members of the committee later joined in the rebellion.³⁷

They first attacked the Karuvarakkundu police station and looted arms and armaments. During the initial stage they decided not to attack the estates because it was their livelihood but later they changed their mind and attacked the plantation and looted it. Later they burned the bungalow, factory and other buildings. Hitchcock writes Karuvarkundu was the first place to suffer. It was there the procession had been held ten days before, and now instead of being asked for money, the local Mappillas could take what they could get. They first went on 21st August 1921 to the police station; the Sub-inspector, having seen the warning the Pandikkad Sub-Inspector received, had buried his arms and gone to Kerala estate where Mr. C.E.M. Browne and Mr. E.H. Colebrook lived. The mob looted the station that day but did nothing else. On 22nd August 1921 a small gang went to the manager's bungalow on the estate and looted a certain amount. Mr. Browne went back to the bungalow at night and caught Thalkolah Mammath, one of the gang and tied him up; then collecting food and fire-arms, he with Mr. Colebrook, the Sub-Inspector and four followers left by a short cut to the Nilgiris. They had waited some time for Mr. Eaton from Pullengode, with whom it had been arranged that in the event of trouble they should all proceed by Sispara pass to Ootacamund, but when they saw the flames of Pullengode bungalow, it being useless to wait longer, they proceeded through the jungle reaching Ootacamund on 25th August. They were followed as far as the Valakad forest bungalow, which was subsequently reported to have been damaged. On 23rd August 1921 a systematic looting of the manager's bungalow took place and the gang did not wholly leave the estate till 25th August 1921. The houses of the Hindu writers and

maistris were also looted, but those who waited were not molested, beyond the extortion of arms from them. Proceedings at Kalikavu were somewhat similar, the police outpost was first looted, but it was only on 23rd August 1921 an attack was made on the estate. Mr. S. P. Eaton, who had waited to the last moment to do what he could for his Hindu subordinates and their families, when he did try to escape was tracked through the jungle and foully murdered.³⁸ Rebels beheaded him and his head was exhibited in the public road and body was thrown away to river. While attacking Easton rebels were taking revenge against cruelties done to the labourers. Each one of the rebels stamped him by recalling one of his cruelties.³⁹ In Mappaddu, south Wynaad, about three thousand moplals, presumably coolies employed in plantations, have deserted work and joined the rioters.⁴⁰

The European planters were generally 'inhuman and cruel' in their treatment of the workers. The planters' cruelties were of course a curse to the plantations. Cases against the workers were if at all 'registered' were never proved. When one such case was reported to the District Magistrate in Munnar in 1903, the verdict given went in favour of the planter concerned. The punishments were always barbaric. The European planters themselves admitted such ruthless punishments. Here the torture was used as a technique. Apart from producing pain, punishment was used to identify the person and was a warning to the other labourers.⁴¹ In the words of a European planter based in Anamalai, the workers, to quote: were in fact slaves, and were treated as such by their maistries, whose only concern was how much money they could pocket before they died on them. It is a fact that this type of maistry used to lock his coolies in the lines in the evening and only let them out to work next morning, irrespective of whether they were sick or well. Mohammedan maistries with Hindu coolies were the worst in this respect.⁴²

Annexation of Malabar by the British had far reaching consequence on the life and history of muslims of Malabar. The introduction of new land revenue system had rack-rented muslim peasantry. Majority became landless labourers and migrated to different parts of the country and also to abroad in search of labour. Plantations within India and outside provided them with works. Life in the

plantations was very miserable. Colonial government had realised the potential of mappila labourers and initiated for their recruitments in different sectors including European plantations. Mappila men, women and children worked in the different plantations. They were the main labour source in the rubber plantations of south Malabar. Low wages and inhuman living conditions in the plantations made their life miserable. They were very hard working but they were not docile workers as needed for the plantation industry. As they had the tradition of responding against injustice, the colonial plantations witnessed their fury during 1921 rebellion. Local people saw the plantations as a symbol of tyrannical colonial government. Rebellions gave them opportunity to retaliate against the oppressive colonial representations.

End Notes

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