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## Uplift of lower caste Hindus in Malabar: The role of Tipu and Mappila Revolts

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The Colonial narratives portrayed Tipu as a villain who killed Hindus and destroyed temples. The paper questions the above notion and cites the examples of Tipu Sultan's reforms which benefited much the lower sections of the Hindu society. Likewise, the paper sees the Mappila riots as a reaction against the higher caste dominations in the Malabar. For the lower caste communities, it was Tipu who initiated the primary steps to eradicate racial discrimination on the name of Caste. The war between the Mysore rulers and Nair army is reflected in certain writings as "Tipu versus Hindus". These writings were clearly used to tarnish the image of Mysore rulers and the same has been used in the right-wing narratives. Upper caste leaders have attempted to shape a Hindu community identity using the events of the Tipu/ Mappila revolt. They have attempted to hide the fact that the Mappila rebellion and the arrival of Tipu had a prominent role in improving the social security of the 'lower' castes, which comprise the majority of Hindus.

**Keywords:** Tipu Sultan, Mappila Riots, Reforms, Savarna Castes, Conversion.

In Malabar, both the smaller scale and larger scale Mappila revolts have had a huge role in setting the path to social progression. These revolts were the means for the subalterns to resist the social

disasters created by the *janmi* system in Malabar. We see the beginning of resistance from the lower classes who were struggling under the twin oppression from the upper class Nairs on one side and the colonial powers on the other side, when Tipu Sultan arrived here. Tipu's arrival marked the first major war against the existing power hierarchy of the upper-class Hindu *janmis*. Several writers have tried to put an anti-Hindu colour to this movement by stating colonial military records. The military campaign of Tipu left a deep dent in the pride of the Nair overlords. It is said that several lower caste Hindus from the inner regions of Malabar converted to Islam during this period: "They are liberated from the condition of having to work tirelessly for the landlords for a pithy allowance just by converting from their religion" (Gangadharan, 2012, p.22). The reason for the conflict between the Nairs and the Mappilas in the several regions was the caste differences that existed between the two communities. This paper examines the role of Tipu and Mappila riots in the reformation of the Hindu lower castes.

### **Mysore invasion in Malabar**

William Logan mentions an issue between the Chirakkal king and the Arakkal king over a dome. "On 11<sup>th</sup> March 1861, the Kolathiri king reported to the English factory head in Thalassery that Ali Raja of Kannur inflicted the greatest wound to Hinduism that could be inflicted upon it. The complaint was that Ali Raja kept a golden dome in one of his mosques" (Logan, 1887/2014, p.276). Apparently, the existing custom was that a dome is to be kept nowhere near Hindu temples except a few. Logan says that due to such conflicts, Ali Raja looked at Haider Ali's military advance hopefully. The rule of Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan vested hope to the subalterns of Malabar. Logan refers to the face-off between the Nair army and the cavalry of Haider Ali, and how the 'Mappila terrorists' finished off the survivors of the fight. Logan describes how this event was perceived by interpreting an order given by Haider Ali in Malabar: "The rule was that the Nairs would henceforth be regarded as the lowest of all the castes. Instead of the existing tradition of all the castes except Brahmins bowing to the Nairs, they would have to bow down to the other castes henceforth. The other castes did not have the right to carry a sword with them till

now. The situation would be the opposite now. From now on, if a Nair man carries a sword around with him, any one from any other caste would have the right to kill him on the spot” (Logan,2014.p.276).Haider Ali’s order jeopardized the existing system where a Nair man could cut down a person from the lower caste even if they crossed their path accidentally. *VellayudeCharitram* published in 1781 gives some details about the contemporary society of those days: “Several villains crossed the temple doors and defiled the idols of Dakshinamoorthi”(Namboothiri, 1998, p.61-62). Since temples were the centres of power of kings, they were regularly ransacked whenever there was a conflict. Not just Muslim kings, Hindu rulers have also been part of these attacks on temples. E.M.S. writes that what Tipu Sultan did was something several Hindu kings have done during the time of war and conflict, and what even Kerala kings like Marthandavarma had done; but that Tipu’s actions have been used to brand him as anti-Hindu.

Several documents suggested that Nairs became the target of the Mysore rulers’ displeasure because they were also the soldier class and that they did several things including religious conversion to get on their good side. Tipu’s order makes a reflection of the social situation of the Nairs of that time: “The custom of Nair women mingling with up to 10 men must now end. You allow your mothers and sisters such immoral conduct. You are all born of illegitimate liaisons. Your sexual conduct is even baser than that of animals. It is now mandated that you abandon these base practices and live like the others henceforth. If you do not obey these dictates, all of you will be made dependents of the Islamic law and your leaders will be taken to my government headquarters.” (Logan, 1887/2014, p.297). These events are referred to in Tipu’s autobiography as well as the Logan Manual. P.K. Balakrishna’s writings reveal the existing outlook of the upper castes on Tipu: “No one has called the period as Tipu’s rule. It was a military conquest. A military conquest where a man from Mysore, crazed with the violent hand of the Islamic law conducted a massacre in this land” (Logan,2014,p.141).Tipu was not a religious fanatic.

Historians with an upper caste mentality exhibit the tendency to ignore the changes that Tipu brought about in the social setup of the

day. Independence fighter and Congress leader Madhavan Nair among several others have portrayed Tipu Sultan in this light to the public. His writings about Tipu reveal the caste consciousness of the upper caste Hindus. He writes that there was not a time before that when the Hindus of Kerala had to struggle so badly. When he states that several Hindus were compelled to convert during that period, we must remember that this was the outlook of many Hindus leaders of the nationalist movement during that time. Talking about the Mappila revolts following 1921, Madhavan Nair says, “Even though Islam proclaims that it is wrong to convert someone’s religion forcefully, its followers have modelled after Tipu Sultan in this regard and not Nabi” (Nair,2020,30). When people with social influence adopt such a stance, it must create a great impact on public opinion.

Trading organizations have helped religions spread their influence across the world. Missionaries who could travel with such organizations were able to propagate their faith across wide regions. Several people in Malabar converted their religion in such a manner. Most of the people who converted were from the lower castes and they did so because the torture from the Hindu landlords was unbearable. Some documents mention that the Zamorin encouraged some fisherfolk communities to convert to Islam. This was not because of his magnanimity. The reason lies in ensuring the safety of the kingdom. The Zamorin’s main aim was to recruit sailors for the navy of Kunjali Marakkar.

The converted people from the disadvantaged classes later looked upon Tipu as a protector. It was with Tipu’s arrival that the centuries of subjugation and abuse from the landlords began to be avenged. The later Mappila revolts were a continuation of this struggle. Tipu’s rule was a challenge to several existing social injustices of the time, and led to several systemic changes. It was in 1859 that the ‘untouchables’ fought for the right to cover their breasts. Tipu Sultan had brought revolutionary changes to Malabar years before that. For the lower castes of the time the very time ‘*kuppayamideekkal*’ or ‘wearing clothes’ signified the breaking of the codes of Brahminical overlordship. Historical books forget such facts and rush to paint Tipu as an anti-Hindu ruler by reflecting the language of several

colonial texts. Willian Logan's description of an event that happened on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1895 is significant: "A man named Kuttikariyan converted to Islam and then converted back. He was killed for the same reason"(Logan,1887/2014, p.368). The event that Logan describes must not be regarded as merely an issue of religious conversion. Several people who converted to other religions due to the mistreatment of these Hindu landlords were often forced to convert back by the same landlords. To ensure the future stability of their social hierarchy, it was necessary for these landlords to maintain a population of lower classes under their control. The attacks against those who converted back were because they grouped with the landlords. They were killed for 'taking their side.' Similarly, a man of the Pisharadi community was killed by a man called Unni Muhammed. Even though it is said that he committed the crime to attain martyrdom, the fact was something else: "The truth was that the murdered Pisharadi was a 'land-gobbler.' In other words, he encroached a lot of land that belonged to others and realizing that he would encroach their land as well, the Mappilas used UnniMammath as a tool (Logan, 1887/2014, p.369).

### **Mappila Riots**

The various conflicts that took place before the 1921 must be looked at from the perspective of the existing social situation. These revolts were able to inflict a dent on the existing social hierarchy. Faith was more or less a part of these conflicts than the entire cause. The lifestyle of several of these converted Muslims could rival the traditional wealth of the landlords whom they feared before. An incident that took place in Tirurangadi in the 1840's can be taken as an example. The above reference appears in the letters of Gundert. A superior officer asked an office worker to take off her top when she showed up covering her breasts. She addresses him without any honorific in this occasion. A class of people who lived like slaves before the religious conversion now had the confidence and power to stand up to injustice. The Mappilas who came to know of this incident questioned the superior officer and killed him. Such incidents must be regarded as resistances to the caste hierarchy.

Brahmadathan Namboothiripad writes this about the 1921 revolt: “It is not right to call the 1921 revolt as Mappila revolt or Malabar revolt. It is more accurate to call it the Khilafat revolution or the Mappila revolution”(Namoothiripad,2020,p.55). The Malabar revolt was a significant page in the history of Kerala’s revolutions. This was a rebellion against the socio-political injustices of the time. Since most landlords were Namboothiris, the majority of the initial violence was directed against them. It is the truth that killings were minimum during the initial days of the struggle and that the looters mostly targeted the rich Namboothiris. During the initial days, the wealthy Hindus mostly chose to flee. It was mostly Namboothiris and Nairs who sought refuge in Kozhikode and other places during the early days of the revolt. This suggests the attitude of the mutineers to these classes. The revolt was not just against the Britishers but also against the oppressive rule of the upper castes. Indian mythology teaches that the murder of a Brahmin is a huge sin. Numerous people from the subjugated castes might have been killed due to the abuse from the higher castes. The rule that it is a sin to kill Brahmins might have been laid down by the Brahmins themselves. It is when such a political situation prevailed, that these Brahmins, who had prospered by mistreating the other caste groups, were massacred by these mobs. This was a revolution in the social history of India. The Britishers believed that a rebellion would target not just them, but also the Hindu landlords who had colluded with them. A notice issued by the then collector Thomas states thus, “The District Magistrate has come to know that several Mappilas have planned to hold Khilafat meetings in Eranandtaluk and rebel against not just the British government but also the Hindu landlords. This will not just disrupt peace but also lead to armed conflicts and subsequently, loss of lives”(qtd. in Nair, 2020, p.74). What happened after that was just as the notice predicted. The 1921 revolts is a continuation of several struggles against the landlords in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was mostly Mappilas from a lower economic stratum who participated in and led the struggle. “Those who worked as daily wage labourers in the morning would come back in the night to rob the family. By then, his attitude and dressing would be different. During this time, the behaviour of these Mappilas towards us, even those

who we knew for long, would change very fast. A Mappila who used to look after the cattle in Advocate IswarIyer's plot sat down on his chair and demanded in a rude tone that he keep his money on the table.”(Nair, 2020,p. 146). Several such incidents have taken place during this time.

Multiple writings suggest that there were forced religious conversions during the last phase of the revolt. The mutineers took that as part of the freedom struggle. Several landlords had decided to back up the Britishers. Most of the people who were forced to convert were from these families. Madhavan Nair writes that Varian KunnathKunjahammed Haji started to mistreat and convert Hindus during the last phase of the revolt. He notes that several Hindus started to celebrate the setbacks faced by the Mappilas during the struggle and that this led to a huge conflict. The events of the last phase of the revolt can be seen in this light. The Mappilas attacked the Hindus and Muslims who backed the Britishers with added vengeance. The historical fact is that in this struggle, the Mappilas also faced people other than the landlords with the same anger. E.M.S. writes, “After the army descended to oppress the resistance, several Hindus fled the scene and the others worked with the army against the mutineers. The Hindu-Muslim unity that was forged for the Khilafat movement fell apart quickly. After this, Muslims began to turn against the Hindus and the mutiny took the shade of a religious clash”(E.M.S., 1905, p.278).

K. Madhavan Nair notes that the losses suffered by Hindus were directly connected to the system of untouchability and caste differentiation that they followed: “If Nairs, Thiyyas, Namboothiris and Cherumans joined hands, they could have resisted the onslaught at least in some places. But because the Namboothiri abused the Nair, the Nair abused the Tiyya, the Tiyya abused the Kanakkan, the Kanakkan abused the Cheruman and the Cheruman abused the Nayadi for years, even as they were suffering themselves, they derived some joy in the suffering of the upper castes above them”(Nair, 2020, p. 25). He also suggests that there was some agreement among the subaltern classes as to the disasters that fell on the ‘upper’ castes who had tortured them with caste discrimination for centuries. It is

believed that the ‘lower’ castes, which comprised the majority of the population, sought to take revenge on the privileged classes for the centuries of mistreatment during this revolt and secretly helped the mutineers. “It is no wonder that Hindus who lost their prowess and weapon training during the British rule, and was left with nothing but their pride and unjust laws, fled when the rebels advanced against them than staying back to fight” (Nair,2020,p. 25). This statement of Madhavan Nair includes the ‘lower’ castes which made up the vast majority in this group of Hindus. However, the history of those groups is the history of the centuries where they had lost the right to education and weapons. There were no common temples for all groups. The temples in those times were such that the ‘lower’ castes could not even step within its bounds. Many see the attacks against the temples of the elite classes as attacks against the temples of Hindus.

### **Conclusion**

There was a concerted effort from some of the ‘savarna’ Hindus to shape the identity of the Hindu community by appropriating the events of the Tipu/Mappila revolt. This has continued even today. They have attempted to hide the fact that the Mappila rebellion and the arrival of Tipu had a prominent role in improving the social security of the ‘lower’ castes, which comprised the majority of the Hindus. Both events created a sense of self confidence among lower caste Hindus who had been historically faced caste based discrimination and animosity from higher caste Hindus.

The present paper shows that both Mysore invasions and Mappila riots have made a crucial role in the social history of Malabar. He is the ruler who firstly tried to sabotage caste ridden *jenmi* system in Malabar. The Nair militia which was a source of support for *jenmi* system and casteism got dismantled under Tipu. His administrative interventions resulted in the age old customs and practises like polyandry. The second wave of incidents which shook *jenmi* system in colonial period was the Mappila riots. The riots have made serious impact upon the nair dominated *jenmi system* in Malabar.



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