



MAPPILA OUTBREAKS OF THE 19TH CENTURY, INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS IDEALS

P. Pratheesh

Asst. Professor, St. Michael's College, Cherthala, Alappuzha, Kerala.

Abstract

This study is an attempt to focus on the genesis and nature of the Malabar uprisings of 19th century. The Mappila outbreaks of the nineteenth century, culminating in the rebellion of 1921, have usually been seen as fundamentally either economic or religious phenomena, and have been treated in isolation from rural protest and revolt elsewhere in India. Colonialism had brought in far-reaching changes in almost all sectors of Indian economy and specifically it brought major changes in agrarian structure. Reduced to insecure tenancy, vulnerable to rack renting and eviction at the hands of Hindu landlords sustained by British courts, the Mappilas responded in a series of outbreaks. The spiritual aspects, the ideal of martyr, and rewards of paradise played an important role in these conflicts. The virtue of martyrdom and the endless bliss of the heaven have been the most motivating factor of the Mappila resistance.

INTRODUCTION

During the second quarter of the 19th century, south Malabar witnessed a series of peasant uprisings. When we explore the causes, it is evident that these uprisings could not be fully explained in terms of agrarian strain alone. The new land revenue system introduced by the East India Company and the changes in agrarian relations introduced by the Mysorean rulers contributed much to the outbreak of these uprisings. The reassertion of 'Janmi' system (through Ryotwari System) made major social changes among the Mappilas of Malabar. Between 1836 and 1852, thirty two peasant outbreaks were reported in Malabar.

BACKGROUND

Colonialism had brought in far-reaching changes in almost all sectors of Indian economy and specifically it brought major changes in agrarian structure. This resulted in continuous tensions all over India which later developed into unorganized and organized struggles of the peasantry. During the late 19th and early 20th century, the peasantry rose in revolt even without a coherent political ideology. By the treaty of Seringapatam in 1792, Tipu Sultan ceded the province of Malabar to the English East India Company. Malabar was incorporated first into the Presidency of Bombay to which position it remained till 1800 and subsequently transferred to the Presidency of Madras. It was during the Mysorean invasions that the agrarian structure of Malabar was disturbed for the first time. The customary land rights of various classes had been disturbed during the short-lived Mysorean rule [from 1760 to 1792].

Mysorean rulers introduced a land tax which encroached on the customary shares of *janmis* and the *kanamdars* (who formerly used to divide the pattam equally) but left the share of the *verumpattamdars* intact. Since many Brahmins and Nairs had fled, lands were actually in possession of *kanamdars*, now mostly Mappila Muslims. Therefore, in all probability, it was with the Mappila *kanamdars* that the Mysorean revenue officials made the first settlement. Those who rebelled or resisted were hanged. With the extension of British colonial rule to Malabar in 1792, the British overturned the land policy followed by the Mysoreans, leased out lands to petty Rajas of numerous principalities, who were cohorts of colonial government during Mysorean invasions. The delusion of the tenures and their ruthless discharge through colonial administrative machinery had resulted in widespread discontent among tenants and sowed the seeds for agrarian revolts known as Mappila Outbreaks. While the Hindu peasants were passive in their sufferings because of their submissiveness and respect for traditional authority, the Mappilas who had enjoyed temporary superiority during the Mysorean rule could not tolerate it and resorted to violence¹.

As a result of British colonial procedure in the 19th century with respect to the social structure of agrarian relations and as an upshot of the impact of new economic forces, Malabar evolved a distributive system of land tenure, which however, embodied features similar to land relations elsewhere in India. The agrarian structure as evolved by the British constituted a class of landlords (big *janmis*) who had absolute ownership of the land, recognized by the law courts and enforced by law. This differed from the pre-colonial system where the *janmis* had overlordship and a share of the produce, but no absolute rights over the soil². The British Courts backed up by Police and Magistrates and troops and big guns made Janmi's independence complete. As conditions worsened, rents rose to high and caused great resentment among the Mappilas, who in the words of Logan were "labouring late and early to provide a sufficiency of food for their wives and children". General resentment amongst the Muslim population led to a long series of violent outbreaks beginning in 1836. These always involved the murder of Hindus, an act which the disgruntled Mappilas regarded as religiously meritorious and as part of their larger obligation to establish an Islamic state.



INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS IDEALS

The Mappillas, the Muslims of Malabar, traditionally trace their origins to the ninth century, when Arab traders brought Islam to the west coast of India³. During the successive invasions of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan in the late eighteenth century, Malabar was thrown into social turmoil⁴. Many Hindus fled in fear of death or forced conversion. The defeat of Tipu and the subsequent British land settlement policies in Malabar, leading to the restoration of the social and economic position of the Hindus. Reduced to insecure tenancy, vulnerable to rack renting and eviction at the hands of Hindu landlords (janmi) sustained by British courts, the Mappilas responded in a series of outbreaks, which Dale has described as 'social protests conducted as religious acts. Each one was a jihad in a social context'⁵. Three hundred years of commercial conflict with the Portuguese, and later the British, had been conducted in these terms, and it had 'bequeathed to the entire Mappilla community a heritage of religious militancy'⁶. The ideology of jihad had become a heroic ideal, leaving the Mappillas with a belief in the virtues and rewards of martyrdom and a disposition to justify and sanctify disputes with non-Muslims in terms of jihad⁷.

The spiritual aspects, the ideal of martyr, and rewards of paradise played an important role in these conflicts. The virtue of martyrdom and the endless bliss of the heaven have been the most motivating factor of the Mappila resistance. Resistance against oppression and determination to save the pearl like faith are incumbent on a Muslim and those who lost their lives in their attempt were revered as martyrs. The Qur-anic verses and Hadith literature at many places had reminded the believes on the holy war and the rewards for those who become martyrs. The Mappila tradition of Jihad's ultimate object was to die as martyrs and save themselves from the fire of the hell.

As stated by C. A. Innes, "The Mappila brooding it may be, over some fancied slight to his 'pearl like' faith over the tyranny of some Hindu landlords till it assumes in his mind the proportion of a gigantic wrong that can be washed out only in blood, determines to win eternal bliss by martyr's death. Others join him and the murder of a landlord or his agent or of an apostate sets the seal on their resolve"⁸. From the time of Mamburam Thangals, the outbreaks assumed a purely religious character and were generally prefaced by a similar series of rituals and in all but few instances, their climax was the self sought martyrdom of the Mappilas who were subsequently revered as martyrs by the community. Each attack on the adversary was conducted as a 'holy war' and the fighters determine to become martyrs and in most cases a series of rituals were performed for the purpose. The rituals varied with the circumstances of each incident and the religious sophistication of the Mappilas involved, but they usually included, the participants donning the white clothes of the martyrs, divorcing their wives asking forgiveness to those whom they felt had done any wrong and receiving the blessings of a saint, visiting the tombs and performing prayers at mosques for the success of their great undertaking⁹.

Before starting for the 'holy war', the Mappilas usually performed two important rites, the 'nercha' and 'mawlid'. A nercha is a vow taking ceremony, while a mawlid is, for the Eranad Mappila (Malabar), a kind of nercha usually meant to be celebrated in honour of prophets or some deceased person¹⁰. Through these rites, the participants indented to get the intercession and blessings of the prophet and the saints for the success of their mission and a place in paradise. In the word of Conrad Wood, "the significance of the adaptation of the nercha and mawlid to the requirements of Mappila outbreaks did not consist only in the consecrating function of these rites. The vital need for unwavering adhesion to a course of action which for success had to culminate in the slaughter in hand to combat of each and every participant, was supplied by the votive aspect of the ceremonial"¹¹.

After an outbreak had actually taken place, the assailants would not try to escape, quite contrary, to ensure that their vows would be promptly fulfilled they would usually barricade themselves in a house, temple or mosque and wait for troops to arrive. After being surrounded, usually armed with their traditional knife, they would make suicidal attack at the troops uttering "Allahu Akbar" (Allah is Great)¹². The object of an outbreak thus consisted of the attack and kills an oppressor to become martyr and to enter paradise. In the outbreak of 1849, one whose thigh had been broken in the first collision with the troops at Manjeri, remained for seven days in all the agony of the neglected wound. He was further tortured by being jolted in a litter twelve long miles from Manjeri to Angadipuram. Yet when the fanatics were cut to places at the latter place there he was at the time of fight hopping on his sound leg in the encounter, only anxious to become a martyr¹³.

On 5th January, 1851, Choondya Mochikkal Athan attacked and wounded severely a government clerk named Raman Menon who had been working in inspecting gingerly oilseed cultivation at Payyanad. Athan shut himself up in the Inspector's house, setting the police at defiance. No persuasion could induce him to surrender himself. He declared that he was determined to die as a martyr. Finally rushing out and firing at the opposing party, he was shot dead¹⁴. The urge o the fighting Mappila to become martyr is evident in another incident in 1896. It seemed that the participants of the outbreak had no intention of evading the 'heavy hand of justice'. Often, their only objective was to bring their own death by hurling themselves in a suicidal charge against the forces who went to deal with them. It is evident from the statement of a wounded



Mappila captured from Manjeri temple in 1896. “We came to the temple intending to fight with the troops and die. That is what we meant to do when we started”¹⁵.

If any Mappila after pledging to become martyr and later changing his mind or returned alive, he was ridiculed by others who called him a half martyr. And nothing can exceed the scorn of their wives and relatives and the whole Mappila community for ‘Mnijna shahid’ or all but martyrs. The courage and determination of the Mappila fighters are well illustrated by the authorities in their reports and messages. In 1843 and 1849, well armed sepoy in overwhelming numbers refused to face a handful of martyrs armed only with war knives and in 1851 even British troops recoiled in temporary confusion before their onslaught. In 1894, volleys from Lee Metford and Sinder Rifles failed to stop them and some of the fanatics reached the bayonets ere meeting with what they sought and entrance to paradise¹⁶.

Thus, the ideal of martyrs, carried out successfully in the Mappila peasant revolts would reveal that the class feeling and grievances of the society were molded by religious ideals. The spiritual aspects and rewards of paradise played an important role in producing some sort of a class consciousness among the peasants. Here the religion became the ideal and force behind the revolts and the defense of Islam directly meant the emancipation of the peasants. The Mappila outbreaks of the nineteenth century, culminating in the rebellion of 1921, have usually been seen as fundamentally either economic or religious phenomena, and have been treated in isolation from rural protest and revolt elsewhere in India.

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