

Mappila Rebellion 1921-1922: Sources at a Glance

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Abstract: This work intends to have a peep into the multifarious establishments of facts towards the *Mappila* Rebellion 1921-1922, while there is considerable agreement as to the bare facts, there is great variations in opinion regarding the causes and circumstances of the Rebellion. While the interpretations of *Mappilas*, Hindus, British, Communists, *Jenmis* and *Kudiyan* tend to follow similar lines. Nevertheless, there is no unanimity even within these categories. However, this tiny effort may give us a clear cut picture of codified theories upon the veracities of sources on *Mappila* Rebellion 1921-22. *Mappila* history was moving towards an event which marked a close to the development that had begun with the advent of the Europeans. The movement towards that famed but tragic end was not inevitable. From the time of the event itself to the present the rebellion has been the subject of much disputes among the historians, academic groups and the public alike.

Key words: *Mappila Rebellion, Khilafat Movement, Divide and Rule, Janmi, Kudiyan, R.H. Hitchcock, KPCC, Malabar Kalapam, Pukkottur, Wagon Tragedy*

INTRODUCTION:

Mappila Rebellion 1921-22, the very title of the event itself has become a matter of dispute. The nomenclature *Mappila* Rebellion has been challenged in view of the fact that Hindus were widely involved in events leading up to the rebellion. It is held that the incident should be called the *Mappila* Rebellion. The period of British ascendancy from 1792-1921 was a bridge period for the *Mappila* Muslims of Kerala. *Mappila* Rebellion 1921-22 A-Historical sketch provides us the facts leading to the causes, courses and results have been variously stated to be *Mappila* economic discontent, *Mappila* fanaticism, the *Khilafat* movement, the freedom movement, British administrative oppression, British divide, conquer and rule policy or a combination of several of these. The Rebellion of 1921 was both an end point and a turning point in the life of the Muslim community. It was the last *Mappila* outbreak and at the same time it was also the first stage in a new development. There is much scope for impartial enquiries and investigations in the subject by applying estimation of the rebellion of the events.

Sources of Rebellion

The *Mappila* Rebellion and its culmination of 1921-22 from the time of occurrence itself to the present has been the subject of much controversy. The causes of the Rebellion have been variously defined as *Mappila* economic unrest, *Mappila* Fanaticism, the *Khilafat* movement, the Freedom Movement, the resistance to the British divide and rule policy etc. There is no consensus of opinion about this rebellion but combination of all.

The first book on the rebellion was the *Moplah Rebellion, 1921* by C. Gopalan Nair published in 1923,¹ Nair was a retired officer of the government of Madras, but had no access to the govt. records on the background and incidents of the rebellion. However, he had collected valuable materials from the newspaper reports and Government's Press communiques at the time of the rebellion and also used for proceedings, legislative council debates, etc. The work suffers from conscious as well as unconscious feelings of the author against the rebels, which, perhaps, could not be avoided at that time by him both as a retired officer and as the member of a wealthy Nair *taravad* of Palghat taluk in Malabar.

M.N. Roy wrote in his book *India in Transition* (1921) that it is "the latest phase of the agrarian trouble" in India. They (*Mappilas*) are very poor, agriculture being their means of livelihood, and have always been under the thumb of money-lenders, who are Hindus. The majority of the big landholders in that part of the country also happen to be Hindus. The recent revolt is caused by purely economic causes.² Roy had then very little information about the happenings in Malabar and their background. His view

reflects his knowledge about rural poverty in India in general and the perception that the colonial government upheld the interests of the landholders as against those of the poor peasants.

A work on the rebellion is *The History of the Malabar Rebellion 1921* by R.N. Hitchcock, the District Superintendent of Police of Malabar during the entire period of the rebellion, and an officer of the police force in Malabar for a number of years before the rebellion. The work is not actually a published book, but only a long report on the rebellion prepared for the government and printed as a confidential document, 'Not for Sale'. Hitchcock's wide acquaintance with the people and places of South Malabar and his extensive knowledge about the *Mappilas* are reflected in this work. But the police officer naturally sided with the Government, and he viewed not only the rebels but also all the non-co-operators as people who ought to be suppressed using all the means at the Government's disposal. In a short 'Foreword' to the book it is stated that the history "has been prepared by Mr. R.H. Hitchcock, C.I. E., M.B.E., under the orders of the Madras Government". The next sentence adds that 'the Government do not however expressly accept responsibility for any statement of opinion which may be found in the narrative.'³ The Appendices I and III of the book giving statements of some rebels and selected judgments on cases related to the rebellion respectively are sources of much importance.

It is interesting that at one stage of his 'reporting' Hitchcock makes the following general observation: "The rebellion was definitely against the Government and Crime only a secondary matter or in furtherance of the main object, to withstand Government,"⁴ Later, in one of his last chapters giving a 'General Summary', he writes that if some of the major crimes "be eliminated as more or less acts of war with the definite object of furthering the rebellion, the remainder is less than might be expected considering the opportunity the times afforded of removing private enemies. Moreover, considering the large number of cases, the total of the persons taking an active part in those murders was comparatively small."⁵ These observations of the police officer who was know the friend of the rebels, should caution those who tend to provoke the view in recent years that the rebellion was only a series of reckless attacks on Hindus by *Mappilas*.

An attempt to view the rebellion as a rising of the peasants was made by K.P. Gayathrivallabha Iyer speaking as President of the Reception Committee for the second Kerala Province Congress Conference held at Palghat in 1923. His view was based on William Logan's observations on the *Mappila* revolts of 19th century and his own knowledge about the then existing tension between the *Jenmis* and tenants in southern Malabar.⁶

A book on the rebellion which may be considered us the most valuable by any student of history is *Malabar Kalapam* (Mal) by K. Madhavan Nair (1882-1933), a lawyer was elected the first secretary of Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee in early 1921 and remained a top leader of the congress in Kerala. He was involved in the non-corporation movement which was supported by the congress. He was Jailed for six months from mid-February to mid August 1921 for not agreeing to abide by the District Collectors orders not to speak at a public meeting at Calicut. Within a couple of days after his release from jail the rebellion broke out. He tried to dissuade *Mappilas* from resorting to violent methods, but the rebel upsurge was too much for him and his co-workers in the national movement to stop. The use of his direct knowledge of the places and persons related to the rebellion makes his book on the event the record of a contemporary and involved observer. The book was published by Madhavan Nair's wife in 1971. In her preface she says that it was return soon after the rebellion.⁷ The statement of the author that he thought it would not be in appropriate to write a series of articles on what he knew about the rebellion as a congress man and as one who had direct knowledge of it, since there has been no enquiry about the rebellion even after one and half years of its occurrence, and no chance of one being conducted in the near future,⁸ upholds what Mrs. Madhavan Nair has returned about the time of composing the book. She also points out that the author could not complete the work as we intended to do. She writes that this is obvious from the fact that at the end of the manuscript it is stated that the chapter will end with description of the nature of the trials under the Martial Law and of the punishments meted out, but no such description is found. There is a statement at the end of the seventh chapter of part 3 of the book saying that the sufferings of the *Mappilas* at the hands of the army and the Hindus will be narrated generally in another

chapter.⁹ The corrupt practices of the authorities which is followed by a section on the Wagon Tragedy. These two sections give a brief account of the authorities of the army and the police towards the *Mappilas*. The sufferings of *Mappilas* at the hands of the Hindus are not particularly mentioned.¹⁰

Madahavan Nair's attempt to present impartial amount of the rebellion it is clear from the narration that the author's sincere effort was to present as full a picture of various aspects of the upheaval without ill will. He has used the extensively the statements of the refugees, both Hindus and *Mappilas* who sought asylum in towns outside the rebel area during, the rebellion.¹¹

I know some people argue that the recent rebellion was caused by the oppression of the *Jenmis*, but I am sure that no one who had a close knowledge about the rebellion will sincerely hold the view that the rebellion started because of the oppression of any particular *Jenmi* or of *Jenmis*. But the poverty and the defects of the *Jenmi-Kudiyann* on system mentioned above, as well as the general towards the property owners, contributed to the force and the sustenance of the rebellion.¹²

A work by a contemporary of the rebellion is *Khilafat Smaranakal* by Mozhikunnathu Brahmadathan Naimbudiripad (Mal.) published in 1965.¹³ The first 14 chapters of the book dealing with the rebellion as such were return in early sixties consulting records available at that time and mentioning direct experience whenever necessary. But the next 9 chapters (chapters 15 to 23) were composed in early thirties, and contains narration of personal experience during the rebellion ('My Experiences').¹⁴ The book also contains an 'end note' with narrations by some persons of their experience during the rebellion. On the whole the book presents intimate pictures of some events of the rebellion, and also provides insight into the motives of the rebels. The author's general view about the uprising is reflected in these sentences:

At a critical juncture of the vigorously conducted *Khilafat* agitation, the British soldiers used force against the (*Khilafat*) activists, and they in turn, for fear of life, retaliated by force. They wanted to escape from the unbearable oppression, also to set up a government favorable oppression, also to set up a government favorable to them. This was their long cherished wish.¹⁵

A Bengali intellectual of Trotskyite persuasion, Soumyendranath Tagore, published in 1937 a small tract, *Peasant Revolt in Malabar*, in which he characterized the rebellion of 1921 as the spontaneous revolt of the peasants in Malabar against British imperialism.¹⁶ Tagore had not visited Malabar before writing the book,¹⁷ and his view of the rebellion was coloured by his Marxist outlook. However E.M. S. Nambudiripad, Communist ideologist from Malabar, writing in early forties did not agree with the view that the rebellion was purely a peasant uprising against the *jenmis*.¹⁸ He did not deny the role of agrarian discontent in the uprising, and he noted that but for agrarian discontent "the *Moplah* would not have rallied round *Khilafat* and congress flags in such large numbers and with such firm determination. Congress-*Khilafat* leaders raised their voice "against both the British Government as well as the *jenmi*" and this gave "a new hope and a new slogan" to the oppressed *Moplahs* who joined the movement in such large numbers." But Nambudiripad wanted 'the Maixists' to answer certain simple but relevant questions" before asserting that the rebellion was only a 'revolt of the peasants in Malabar'. The questions are mainly about the involvement of *Mappilas* alone in the rebellion. "The oppression and exploitation of the *jenmi* and the officials are as bad for the Hindu peasants as for their *Moplah* comrades." He also noted a certain number of forced conversions during the rebellion, which "cannot by any stretch of imagination be explained away as part of a purely agrarian movement."¹⁹ Still, he explains why the movement in its "later stages" took a partially communal turn. The desertion of the movement altogether by Hindus after the outbreak of the rebellion and the arrival of the military is given as the cause for this: "The *Moplah* found that his Hindu compatriots both the leaders and the rank and file deserted him; the military arrived to hunt him out of his abode; his Hindu neighbours helped the military as against him. He naturally got enraged at them. This was worked upon by fanatical and adventurous among the rebels. No wonder then if anti-Hindu actions took place. The wonder is, rather that they were so few in number and proportion."²⁰

In another work Nambudiripad gives more attention to the general background of the frustration of the *Mappilas* which formed the "essence of the *Mappila* problem in Malabar" the hegemony which has been lost with the establishment of British

power, to save Islam from the new culture which arose as a result of English education and the British system of administration, and to resist the British measures to suppress them completely. Failure of the British to do away with the *jenmi* oppression even after Logan's findings about agrarian causes of the *Mappilla* 'outbreaks' (of 19th century) added to the wrath of the *Mappilas* towards the British regime. The Congress-*Khilafat* movement held out before the *Mappilas* the prospects of a struggle against the British, and naturally they joined the struggle in large numbers. But the *Mappilas* were totally incapable of understanding the principle of non-violence:

For them if the British government was '*satanic*' it means that a *jihad* should be conducted against it and if necessary one should be ready to become *Shahid* (martyr) for it.²¹

This explains why *Mappilas* alone broke out in rebellion against the British regime. But Nambudiripad's analysis fails to explain why the rebels turned against the Hindus even in the first few days of the rebellion, even before the army entered the region. K. Madhavan Nair, the author of *Malabar Kalapam*, Who had occasion to watch the rebellion on from close quarters, especially during the early days of the rebellion, writes:

The rebellion started and spread around because the false rumour about the demolition of the mosque at Tirurangadi by the firing of soldiers circulated in the country. Therefore, *Mappillas* had cause to feel enmity towards the government only, and not by any means towards the Hindus. Yet, what made the *Mappilas* loot the Hindu houses in eastern Ernad and some other places from the next day after the outbreak of the rebellion. Some people used to argue that the help rendered by Hindus to the soldiers and the police made the *Mappilas* turn against the Hindus. But the soldiers and the police entered the interior only fifteen days after the outbreak of the rebellion.²²

Madhavan Nair adds that the lootings of the first few days cannot be seen as a fight between the rich and the poor. "if it was so why then were the rich among the *Mappilas* excluded from the lootings?"²³ was it then a communally motivated uprising? A clear answer to this question cannot be found even in the later writings of Nambudiripad on the history and society of Kerala.²⁴

A book by a contemporary of the rebellion is *1921-1e Malabar Lahala* (Malabar Rebellion of 1921-Malayalam) by Koyatti Moulavi, a native of Tirurangadi, the small town from where the first rebellious acts started on 20 August 1921. Only the second improved edition of the book published in 1956 is now available this edition has an introduction by K. Madhava Menon, a Congress activist and leader from his early years, who was also a contemporary of the rebellion. The author claims that the book was composed using, besides his own experiences, the reports in the press of the time and the transactions of the special courts. In the introduction Madhava Menon writes that the truth about the rebellion has been really brought out by Koyatti Moulavi as "exemplifying the possibility of men sacrificing their life for gaining independence and for asserting self respect."²⁵ The book gives an account of the political developments in south Malabar from the beginning of the *Khilafat* movement to the suppression of the rebellion. In general, the author presents the view that the rebellion was essentially a fight against the British power for gaining independence. But, in the absence of proper leadership it became an anarchic uprising and resulted in the death of 12,000 brave *Mappilas*. Moulavi was of the view that the violent upheaval could have been averted if the British authorities had permitted able nationalist leaders to enter the place from where the revolt started. He does not give credence to the view that the rebellion was basically a peasant revolt, and even points out that 95 percent of the ten thousand and odd population of Tirurangadi from where the rebellion broke out were Muslims who did not suffer from the oppressive *jenmi* system.²⁶

Academic research on the rebellion started soon after the official records on the rebellion were made available to researchers fifty years after the event. D.N. Dhanagere's paper '*Agrarian Conflict, Religion and Politics: The Moplah Rebellion in Malabar in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*' was published in *Past and Present* of February 1977. In general the paper agrees with the view of those who see the agrarian discontent of *Mappilas* as the basic cause of the uprising, "which was only

intensified by the religious and ethnic identity of the *Moplahs* and by their political alienation, above all in the years between 1885 and 1920"²⁷

Like others who support the peasant revolt theory of the rebellion, Dhanagere also is unable to explain why Hindu tenants and agricultural labourers of the lowest strata of society who suffered equally, if not more, under the *jenmi* system did not join the *Mappilas* in the revolt due to 'discontent': 'identity' and 'alienation' are poor substitutes for proper explanation.

Another paper on the rebellion published in the same year and month (1977 February) is '*The Mappila Rebellion, 1921: Peasant revolt in Malabar*' by Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. of the university of Texas at Austin.²⁸

Though there is '*peasant revolt*' even in the title of the paper, Hardgrave, after examining the various factors that produced the rebellion, is prepared to identify a multiplicity of explanatory factors in the analysis of the rebellion: "agrarian discontent, the perceived threat to Islam, the Congress-*Khilafat* agitation, inflammatory newspaper reports, and provocation by Government officials and police". He also leaves 'space' for "others yet unidentified"²⁹

Stephen F. Dale of Ohio State University (U.S.A.) published in 1980 his study on the relations (and the confrontation) between the Muslim *Mappilas* on the one hand, and the European colonial powers and the dominant Hindu castes on the other, for about four and a half centuries.³⁰

He traces what he calls 'the militancy of the *Mappilas*' to their struggle against the Portuguese efforts to gain control of the spice trade in the Indian Ocean. The militancy was, sustained through the times of Dutch trade on the Kerala coast and the British control of the sub-continent. It became a means of defending what Dale conceived of as the frontier of South Asian Islamic (*Mappila*) society. Its internal frontier was the Hindu society dominated by land owning Brahmins (*Nambudiris*) and the external frontier with the Europeans from Portuguese to the British. Dale looks at the struggles of the *Mappilas* against the Portuguese down to the British as well as the Hindus as efforts to defend the external and internal frontiers of the Islamic community in south west India. The *Mappila* revolts of 19th century (called '*Moplah* outrages/outbreaks' by the British) are closely examined from this point of view and found to be *jihads* to defend the internal Islamic frontier. The rebellion of 1921-22 was different in nature from the revolts of 19th century in that the "armed conflict were directed, however haphazardly, towards an identifiable political goal.

However, the methods and political ideal which the movement (Non-co-operation-*Khilafat*) suggested to the *Mappilas* were tragically anachronistic in the context of twentieth century India, for the agitation triggered an unplanned rising in which the *Mappilas* attempted to establish an Islamic kingdom in south Malabar.³¹

Finally Dale comes down on the habit of using the rebellion to support preconceived ideas, and summarizes his view: This habit of exploiting the *Mappila* Rebellion to support preconceived or historical ideas is remarkably reminiscent of the treatment accorded that earlier upheaval, the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58.... The *Mappilas* did rebel against the British, they enjoyed widespread support among the Muslims, and many peasants undeniably took part. The rebellion, though, was not a nationalist uprising,... although it occurred in the context of a nationalist movement. The Rebellion was not a peasant revolt in the sense that peasants joined specifically to resolve their social and economic grievances as agriculturists. Finally, the Rebellion was emphatically not a modern political event, even though it occurred in the twentieth century. Quite the contrary, the Rebellion, like the Mutiny, was essentially an archaic form of protest, as it offered no viable political alternative for the future.³²

Dale's study raises the discussion of the rebellion above the usual question as to whether it was a communal (anti-Hindu) revolt or a peasants rebellion, and presents the events in a wide canvas of time to examine the vicissitudes of *Mappila* life in Kerala revealing the internal pressures that almost pushed the community into the uprising. However, doubts have been raised regarding the validity of using the 'frontier theory' to study the growth of a religious community in south India.

The thesis on the rebellion by Conrad Wood, scholar of the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, was published as *The Moplah Rebellion and its Genesis in 1987*.³³ Wood was a convinced Marxist at the time of working for his thesis, and after examining British records on the land settlement in Malabar in the 19th century, he came down to Kerala and studied in detail the social and economic background of the 'outbreaks' of 19th century and the rebellion of 1921-22. He came to the conclusion that the rebellion occurred because the *Ernad Moplah* had "grievances unresolved" and the British administration took his "subordination for granted." The *Moplah* waiting for a "sign of the prostration of the power which sustained the *Jenmi* found that the moment of opportunity had arrived in August 1921. The rising did not owe much more to the *Khilafat* and non-co-operation movement "than some symbiosis." The insurgents identified themselves "with a community Islamic in definition."

But although, as an attempt to establish *Moplah raj*, the rebellion proved abortive, there are grounds for supposing that the rising of 1921-22 was not entirely a failure in context of the attempt of the *Ernad Moplah* a failure Soumyendranath Tagore, to resolve his traditional grievances.

Wood thought that "the fact of the rebellion having occurred influence the pressure for agrarian reform" leading to the passing of the Malabar Tenancy Act in 1930, "which represented the first step to curb *jenmi* Power."³⁴ This assumption of wood is questionable in view of the fact that the Tenancy Act took so many years after the rebellion, and that continuous pressure had to be exerted by the tenancy movement in Malabar to get it passed.

Another valuable work on the rebellion, *Against Lord and State Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar 1836-1921* by K.N Panikkar³⁵ begins with an excellent analysis of the agrarian society of Malabar in the 19th century and goes on to examine the tradition of the *Mappilas* of Malabar. He notes the Phenomenal increase of the *Mappila* population in the 19th and 20th centuries through conversion from lower castes of the Hindu community their dependence on agricultural and trade, and the scarcity of employment opportunities among them. Their condition was "worsened by unfriendly attitude of British officials, particularly during the first half of the nineteenth century."³⁶ In these circumstances the influential religious intellectuals among them contributed to the growth of anti-British feelings in the community. This is seen as the background of *Mappila* risings of the 19th century. The 'final upsurge' in the form of the rebellion of 1921-1922 was made possible when a common organization was formed during the period of *Khilafat* agitation and Non-cooperation Movement in the second decade of 20th century. Examining the various aspects of the rebellion that started in August 1921. Panikkar is able to see its complex nature and the interaction of the various factors which went into its making: "Two factors appear to have been dominant: anti-British feelings and the urge to free from the exploitation of the propertied classes."³⁷ Panikkar also recognises the influence of religion in the making of the rebellion: religion is seen as "the ideology which enabled discontent to be translated into action"³⁸ But an ideology to be capable of moving discontented people to a rebellion of the dimensions of the one of 1921 should inspire confidence through the vision of an alternative society, one which may not have discontent. Saying that the ideology that translated peoples' discontent into action had only action as its aim may mean that the search as to what the ideology meant to the discontented was not carried, for some reason, beyond the obvious, i.e., rebellious action.

M. Gangadhara Menon's *Malabar Rebellion, 1921-1922* published in 1989 is obviously a dissertation brought out as a book without proper editing or even proof checking. After giving an account of the land relations of Malabar in early 20th century, the book starts narration of the events related to the nationalist movement, in Malabar from its beginning at Calicut in the second half of the second decades of the century. The growth of the movement, along with the tenants' agitation for legislative measures to check the oppressive use of *Jenmi* power, and the later spread of the *Khilafat* agitation in South Malabar are traced to show the excitement new expectations and tensions of early 1921. Later events such as the first All Kerala Congress Conference at Ottappalam in April 1921, and some trouble at Pukkottur, a village near Malappuram, involving a *jenmi* and a police officer on one side and few *Khilafat* activists and a *Mappila* mob on the other side at the end of July are described with some details giving a feel of the tense atmosphere in early August. This is followed by a narration of the violent incidents at Tiruangadi on 20 August which marked the outbreak of

the rebellion. An account of the risings in the next few days in various centres in Eranad Valluvanad and Ponnani taluks is followed by an account of the resulting turmoil and an examination of the composition of the rebel gangs and background and activities of some rebel leaders. This is the only work on the rebellion that gives a narrative account of the events culminating in the upheaval. The final chapter attempts to ascertain the causes and character of the rebellion on the basis of the events and issues leading to it."³⁹

Notes and References

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- ⁷ K. Madavan Nair, *Malabar Kalapam* (Malayalam), Calicut, first pub. 1971, reprint 1987, preface. p.v.
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- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.256.
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- ¹¹ Such statements were recorded by Congress leaders and volunteers who conducted the refugee camps.
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- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.1.
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