



INSTITUTE OF OBJECTIVE STUDIES, NEW DELHI

ONE-DAY ONLINE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON

1921: Malabar Revolt

On Saturday, July 30, 2022

CONCEPT NOTE

Background

Revolution or Mappila Rebellion or Peasants Uprising: There many dimensions for the historic event of 1921. Depending up on the perspective one has, it is called Malabar Rebellion, Malabar Revolt, Malabar Revolution Peasants' Uprising, Mopla Riots, and Mopla Massacre. R H Hitchcock, the British police officer in charge of Malabar called his book: *A History of Malabar Rebellion*.

There were many social and political reasons for the Mappila Muslims to take arms against the British overlords. Due to the oppression of land lords, who were supporters of British regime, the peasants were not getting adequate wage or food. The uprising was the culmination of a series of struggles for rights by the tenants and farmers against the British and the landlords in Malabar (Northern Kerala). While the majority of the rebels were Muslims, there many Dalits and backward castes in support of the cause. There were also a couple of upper caste revolutionaries who extended support to the uprising.

As the Khilafat Movement gained momentum across the subcontinent, Mappilas in Malabar defied British rule in 1921 and established an independent state, called 'Malayala Rajyam' (Malayala Kingdom), under the rule of Variamkunnath Kunhammad Haji. The regime existed only for 6 months from August 1921 till February 1922. The ruler Variamkunnath Kunhammad Haji declared Malabar as an independent state with separate passport, currency and taxation system. He was supported by many Muslim scholars, among them legendary Ali Musaliar of Tirurangadi. During his brief rule, Haji attacked colonial police stations, punished landlords who supported the British Empire and distributed land to poor farmers.

Series of Uprisings

During the British period, there was a series of uprisings by the Mappilas, especially in the 19th century. From 1836 to 1853, there were 22 surprising uprisings in Malabar. There was a perception that the uprisings were basically peasant revolts due to economic deprivation suffered by peasants (most of the peasants and tenants were Muslims and the landlords were upper caste Hindus). The basic reason for the uprisings was the discontent of farmers and anti –people land ownership system introduced by the British.

The most serious of these uprisings was the one in 1849, which occurred in Manjeri, a town in Malappuram dist. The rebels killed a British Ensign and charged at the 43rd Native Regiment, whose soldiers broke ranks and ran for their lives. Later when reinforcements arrived from Kannur, the army took on the rebels and 64 of them courted death, virtually falling on the bayonets of the soldiers. The Madras Government, alarmed

by these repeated 'outrages', decided to appoint a Commission headed by a former District Judge of Malabar, Mr. T. L. Strange, to look into the reasons for the unrest of the Mappilas during 1836-1852.

At that time, there was a very popular Muslim scholar in Malabar, known as Syed Fazal Pookoya Thangal of Mamburam. The British believed that he was behind every uprising of Mappilas, from 1848 (when he returned from Makkah after studies) to 1852. Malabar Collector H. V. Connolly forced him to go to exile. He went to Yemen, Makkah and later to Istanbul, where the Sultan made him the Governor of Zatur of Yemen. This gives a particular significance to the fact that the rebellion of 1921, which happened against the background of the Khilafat agitation, broke out at the Mamburam mosque founded by Fazal Pookoya Thangal.

Mr. Strange came to the conclusion that there were no grounds for the theory that the rebellions were peasant uprisings against their landlords. H. V. Connolly, the Collector, also concurred with this view. Within a few years, Collector Connolly was killed and his official residence attacked by Mappila revolutionaries. Subsequently, in the 1880's, the then Malabar Collector, William Logan took a fresh look at the issue and differed from the views of his predecessors. He reported to the Madras Government that Muslim tenants were facing a great deal of injustice due to the Malabar Tenancy Act of 1887.

To crush the rebellion, the British administration appointed senior police officer R. H. Hitchcock, who led raids in the villages to find and kill the revolutionaries. A special paramilitary unit was formed to suppress the uprisings, forcing the Mappila men to flee to the hills, leaving women and children. According to historians, the women and children faced the brutalities of the colonial forces.

Wagon massacre

On November 19, 1921, more than 100 prisoners of the rebellion were stuffed into an unventilated railway wagon at Tirur Railway Station. That was the cruel and horrible massacre of the British suppression was the wagon tragedy (it is not a tragedy but massacre) when 70 prisoners on their way to prison, were suffocated to death in a closed railway goods wagon.

In return, the British writers called the uprising simply the 'riots', for vilifying the community as 'fanatics' that "attacked Hindus" and "forced them to convert to Islam". Variyamkunnath Haji himself sent letter to The Hindu newspaper on October 1921 by denying allegations of the British.

Official records say 2,337 rebels were killed in the suppression of the revolt, but some historians argue the real casualties are above 10,000. Prisoners were deported to jails across India, including in the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, where many died. Many were forced to leave Malabar and settle in towns in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Complex Narratives

1921 Revolt was used for propaganda against "the fanatic Mohammedans" mainly by the writers and leaders of Travancore who belonged to newly emergent social classes. They were influenced by the landlords who were forced to flee. They were ignorant of the socio-political and economic reasons that propelled the uprising. Only later progressive historians corrected the distorted narratives.

The root cause of the rebellion is not to be sought in communal conflict. It sprang out of political repression. Police atrocities added fuel to the fire. This rebellion was later recognised as part of the armed resistance against the British Raj, similar to 1857. Islam certainly played a great role in inspiring the revolutionaries.

Misuse by Hindutva Forces

1921 has acquired new traction positively and negatively. The Hindutva propagandists are using the uprising simply as anti-Hindu riot dittoing what the official British narrative. They are rehashing and copy pasting remarks of even Gandhi and Ambedkar far removed from the real context of their responses and spreading social media. However there is a positive response also as progressive historians are coming out defending the uprising as a part of the freedom struggle and reprinting objective and factual books published before. The conference will be able to attract attention of writers, intellectuals and activists to the real nature of 1921 with focus on all aspects from an objective historical perspective.

Themes for Deliberations

It is proposed to have eight sessions in the conference dealing with

1. The historical background of Mappila uprisings right from the advent of the Portuguese at the end of fifteenth century.
2. Survey of the early literature stressing the need to fight foreign invasion on the Malabar Coast starting with the writings of Sainudheen Makhdam.
3. The British and the return of anti-people land laws which restored agricultural land to landlords and its impact on Mappila tenants.
4. The influence, if any of the concept of Jihad and Shahada in the uprisings.
5. The role of Muslim women like Malu, the wife Variamkunnath Kunhammad Haji, Cheerathodi Fathima, Mannarkkad Kunhipathumma, Adhikarathody Kajjamma, Aravankara Thiyyumma to highlight the role of women in the uprising.
6. Umer Qadi, Fazal Pookoya Thangal, Variamkunnath Kunhammad Haji, Ali Muasliar and others revolutionaries.
7. Impact and consequences of the Revolt.
8. Release of English translations of select writing on the topic.

Participation

Academics, scholars, administrators, social workers, policy makers, promoters of international cooperation etc. from anywhere in the world can participate.

Language

The language of presentation will be English.

Register to participate at: <https://forms.gle/4694yHf5eWzzMx7R6>

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