

# **POLITICAL AFFILIATION AND RELIGIOUS AFFINITY: RESPONSE OF THE MAPPILAS OF NORTH MALABAR TO THE MYSOREAN RULE**

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The Mysorean invasion of the second half of the eighteenth century was a watershed in the history of Kerala not just for the decisive impact it brought about in the fabric of the contemporary socio-political system but also for the unending dialogues it unleashed on questions of the nature and repercussions of the episode. The event and its reverberations have been evaluated from varied historiographical and ideological perspectives. The colonial viewpoint tended to depict the invasions as brutal acts capable of subverting the political tranquility of the land and of destroying the communal harmony that had persisted here for centuries. Even historians of the prominent anti-colonial school repeated the same colonial version in an inverted manner. Meanwhile, a group of Muslim historians who, while opposing the colonial version, attempted to exonerate the invaders from all such charges and ennobled them as exponents of modernization and social justice. All the aforesaid versions treated Mappilas as collaborators and beneficiaries of the Mysorean interregnum and sought to justify this with reference to their alleged anticipation of a deliverance; while the colonial and anticolonial version portrayed them as opportunists or communalists, the mainstream Muslim version justified their attitude as progressive and revolutionary. All these versions shared a simple but wrong conjecture and often overlooked the way how the community structure of the Mappilas and the contrasting internal class interests played a determinate role in defining the nature of alliance/antagonism towards the new rulers. In fact, religion was neither the sole nor the decisive factor for the Mappilas in welcoming or rejecting the new masters. The commonly shared conception of a monolithic

Mappila community and the notion of an immediate and unconditional support extended to the invasion of 'co-religionists' need to be reexamined.

The eighteenth century witnessed the fall of the Mughal Empire in India and the rise of several regional states in its place. One of these states was Mysore, which soon developed on a scale to challenge any of the successor states of northern India. It evolved out of the seventeenth century Wodayar dynasty through the leadership of its military commander Haidarali who came to power through a military coup in 1761 and the state reached the zenith of its power under his son Tipu Sultan who succeeded him in 1782. From the moment of his accession to power in Mysore, Hyder started a series of political expeditions and, by conquering the Carnatic on the east coast and the Malabar Kingdoms on the west coast, moved with a definite plan to consolidate the entire South Indian peninsula under his control.

That Hyder was determined to subdue the petty Kingdoms of the Malabar region was clear from the very beginning of his political career. Even when he was the faujdar of Dindigal he had accepted an invitation from the Raja of Palghat to interfere in the affairs of the country. The political condition of north Malabar was favorable to the ambitious Mysorean ruler. The disintegration of the Kolathiri dynasty was already in progress and the kingdom was in a state of anarchy because it had been struggling under political intrigues, conflicting interests and mutual jealousies. The Ali Raja of Kannur, who supported one of the factions of the Kolathiri house in a civil war, personally met Haidar at Mangalore and invited him to conquer Malabar by assuring him of great political and commercial possibilities. He was requested by Haidar to gather troops and provide adequate ammunition.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Malabar, Hyder had clear cut economic and commercial ambitions. The possession of coastal kingdoms of Malabar was immensely useful to the land locked kingdom of

Mysore. Having succeeded in occupying coastal Karnataka, Haidar Ali had a plan to bind the ports of south Canara with those of Malabar and to bring its spice trade under his control. This motive to maintain sea trade with the Malabar ports is revealed in a few Kannada papers preserved in the Cochin archives.<sup>2</sup> The invitations of the Palaghat Raja and Ali Raja of Kannur were mere pretext to Haidar Ali to meet his economic designs on Malabar. His economic schemes were obvious in his decision to appoint Ali Raja of Kannur as his governor of Malabar. Through this appointment Haidar Ali expected an easy access to the pepper lands of the region and the support of the Mappila trades who were playing a crucial role as the intermediaries in the local pepper markets.

### **Structure of the Mappila Community**

The Mappila Muslims formed one of the major communities of Kerala. In spite of their common origin and uniform cultural traits there are regional and local variations among them. In the pre-modern period Mappilas of north Kerala were a heterogeneous community characterized by varied social strata and diverse interest groups evolved out the age long socio-economic interaction with the native social system centered on caste. In course of time they emerged as a socially stratified and economically uneven group without having a sense of community feeling and a common leadership. The Mappilas were divided on both vertical and horizontal lines. Vertically they were divided into Tangals (Muslims of Arab origin) and Malabaris (native Muslims). Tangals, just as today, had been a highly respected segment of the society and were honored with grants of land by the ruling chieftains (*Naduvazhis*), Valapattanam, Dharmadam, Ramanthaly, Peringathur, Kumbala, and Purathil areas of north Kerala had been the prominent settlements of the Tangals. Horizontally the Malabaris were divided into tarawadu (elite) Mappilas, non-tarawadu Mappilas, *Pusalans*, *assans* (barbers) and *vellam kories* or suppliers of water to the mosques.<sup>3</sup> Most of the Muslim tarawadus in north Malabar had their origin after the ascendancy of the Ali Rajas of

Kannur. They were attempting to elevate some of their co-religionists on a par with the Nair *Janmis* in order to serve their commercial interests in the region, as it is evident from the history of Muslim tarawadus of Edakkadu, Dharmadam Sreekandapuram, Irikkur and Taliparambu.<sup>4</sup> Non-tarawadu Mappilas found their means of livelihood from trading activities and cultivation and also by serving the Nayar and Muslim tarawadus. As simple lease holders they were a distant and distinct part of the hierarchical jati based social system of Malabar. *Puslans* or *puthiya Muslims* (New Muslim) lived in the coastal villages and majority of them were either converted fishermen or migrant settlers from the southern part of Kerala. Fishing and boat making were their means of subsistence. *Ossans* or barbers and *vellam kories* or people who supplied water to the mosques, were considered as lowly people. These groups were endogamous and followed strict customs of communal discipline imposed by the *nattu muppans* or local chiefs. Front rows or mosques were reserved for the Tangals and for the people from the tarawadus and they had separate portions of land in the burial grounds attached to the mosques. This Mappila social structure can truly be compared to the jati hierarchy late medieval Kerala. At the same time, they were not absorbed in to the jati system that shaped and controlled the socio-political structure of the region. Even the Arakkal tarawadu was not recognized as an independent authority of the land. Alienation of this kind made the Mappilas more turbulent than others. Their struggles in the late medieval and colonial periods should be seen as a reaction to this estrangement and were the attempts to locate themselves in the social hierarchy of contemporary Kerala.

### **Conflicting Representations**

The colonial writings on Mysore-Kerala relations had taken a definite political design and generally shared a common conception that during the course of the Mysorean invasion, the Mappilas, all on a sudden, sided with the invaders. The colonial method of painting certain communities and groups of India in

dark colours in order to nurture communal and casteist tensions had played its desired role in this case well. The Mysorean invasion to Malabar was a favorite theme of the colonial writers which was used to misrepresent the native society. They formulated stereotypes like 'Mappila treachery' and 'Mappila infidelity' to describe the anti-feudal stance of the Muslims of the region. Robert Taylor, the chief of Tellicherry factory (1789-1794) gave the following statement about the 'treachery' of the Mappilas and strongly recommended to prohibit the use of arms by that community:

'From the repeated treachery and notorious infidelity of the whole Moplah race, rigid and terrifying measures are become indispensably necessary to draw from them the execution of their promises and stipulations. Lenity has ever been found ineffectual, and the indulgencies of a British government incapable of securing their attachment and we understand that for these reasons the general means to deprive this faithless race of men of the power of repeating their former perfidious conduct by prohibiting to the whole cast the use of arms and the possession of all war like instruments'.<sup>5</sup>

According to De La Tour, a French commentator, the country of the Nayres was thrown into great consternation by the cruelty of the Maplets, who following the cavalry (of Haidar) massacred all who escaped without sparing women or children.<sup>6</sup> William Logan coined a derogatory term 'jungle Mappilas' to depict the Muslims who were fighting for attaining their minimum socio-economic rights.<sup>7</sup> Most probably, he was being influenced by the medieval European historiographical tradition and may have been drawing a line of parallel between the 'rebellious Moors' and the Mappila agitators of Calicut.<sup>8</sup> The British officials spread Memoirs, Autobiographies and historical writings written by unidentified authors, which were filled with stories of forced conversions and circumcisions of Hindus. A major section of the writers and historians of Kerala, who were critical of British policy and their model of representing native people and history, were

also taking the same view of the colonial writers on Mappila-Mysorean relations and projected the Mappilas as opportunists and anti-Hindus. The rhetoric of K.V. Krishna Iyer who wrote elaborately on the history of Malabar under the Zamorins can be taken as the best illustration for this misconception and prejudice. He wrote: 'The Zamorin's alliance with the Portuguese and their joint siege of Kunjali Marakkayar in 1598 – 1600 and Haidar Ali's alliance with Azhi Raja and their joint invasion of Chirakkal, Kottayam, Kadattanad and Calicut widened the growing rift between the Hindus and Muslims. The Mysorean occupation served only to embitter these animosities which the British were powerless to assuage. Wearing the white dress of a *sahid* or martyr the Mappilla left his home and relatives, killed his Hindu enemy, occupied a Hindu shrine if there was one on the way, and finally sought death at the hands of the authorities, who were also infidels'.<sup>9</sup> To many native writers the Mysorean invasion was 'honouring the Malayalees with Islam' and they genuinely believed that the Mappilas greatly benefited from the socio-political transformation unleashed by it.<sup>10</sup> This kind of an approach still guides many in analyzing the response of the Mappilas to the Mysorean rule, which has come to prevail over primarily because of the oversight of the academicians on the stratified nature of the structure of the Mappila community. Right wing nationalist historians are happy to elaborate this frame work to see the Kerala society kept divided on communal lines. Even the left wing historians are not fully free from the above notion as is evident from the following statement of Dr. K.K.N. Kurup. He wrote: 'The Mappila community in Malabar as a whole had the greatest ambition to participate in the administration of political power. When they were under the Mysorean government they had sympathy towards it to a certain account of economic interests and common religion'.<sup>11</sup> Scholars from the West like Frederick Dale,<sup>12</sup> R.E. Miller,<sup>13</sup> and Theodore Gabriel<sup>14</sup> who wrote on the Mappilas recently, followed the colonial representation of the Mappilas, and repeated the portrayal of the Mysorean invasion as a period of 'Mappila triumph'. They did not pay any serious

attention to the existence of the inherent divisions and clash of interests within the community during the pre-British period. It was Stephen Frederick Dale who inflicted considerable damage to historical reality by developing the frontier theory of Mappila militancy; it was conceived of as a product of the long confrontation with European powers on the one hand and the Hindu community on the other.

Efforts on the part of the so called 'Muslim historians' of Kerala to project Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan as the champions of reform and reconstruction was also based on similar historiographical misconceptions, for, they too totally ignored the existence of divisions and diversity within the Mappila community. Neglecting the active elements of discord, they painted a picture of pan-Mappila culture and a monolithic Muslim community. For instance, Dr. C.K. Kareem and Prof. Ibrahim Kunju, leading historians of this category, tried hard to salvage the Mappilas and the Mysoreans from the allegation of cruelties, particularly by citing the list of donations the Mysore Sultans made to the temples and other religious institutions of Malabar. To counter the arguments of so called Nationalist and Right Wing historians, they formulated a theory of Mysorean social revolution. Ibrahim Kunju writes: 'The occupation of Malabar by the Mysore Sultans created a social revolution of unparalleled magnitude in the country. It gave an opportunity to large numbers of lower castes who had been ill-treated inhumanly for centuries, to escape from the trammels of caste rules and make a bid for social and consequent economic freedom by embracing the religion of the conquerors. The higher castes, who used to ride roughshod over the untouchable castes, now found themselves in a strange predicament in which they could neither oppress the new converts nor withhold them from newly won rights. The new converts probably didn't fail also to make the higher castes often feel the impact of the changed situation'.<sup>15</sup> Dr. Kareem vindicated the high handedness of the Mappilas who were in league with the Mysorean officials thus: "The Mappilas who were suppressed by