

*The Malabar Moplah revolt in 1921 has been mainly interpreted as wide-spread communal riots. Saumyendranath attempted in his brochure "Peasant Revolt in Malabar", to lay bare the real causes of the uprising and underscored the fact that the basic character of the movement was agrarian—a revolt of the peasants against the landlords. In the foreword, he wrote: "After the revolt had been suppressed, the government published a report on the uprising...but withheld its own publication from the public. Apart from this report, no other authentic account of the peasant uprising has yet been published...Future historians will, I am sure, do the fullest justice to this heroic struggle of the peasantry against feudalism supported by imperialism." After the publication of the brochure in 1937, it was banned by the then Bengal government.*

## PEASANTS REVOLT IN MALABAR—1921

Malabar, the ancient land of Kerala, is situated on the western sea-coast of Southern India. It covers an area of 5,792 square miles and is one of the most fertile and beautiful regions of India.

In 1922, according to the census report, the population of Malabar was little over three millions, and the Ernad district, which played such an important role in the agrarian uprising, had a population of 400 thousands, of which 1,63,328 were Hindus and 2,36,672 were Muslims.

The Muslims of Malabar are called Moplahs. They are mostly poor peasants, and the Moplahs of the Ernad district are no exception. Only those Moplahs who are engaged in the timber trade on the coast of the Chaliar river—their number is small compared to the entire Moplah population—could be said to be slightly better off than the rest. In the hilly tracts of Nilambur and Vandoor, there are a few well-to-do Moplahs who cultivate lands taken on lease from the government. But very few amongst the Moplahs are landlords.

The chief occupation of the Moplahs is agriculture. The Moplah peasants are very hard-working. They reclaimed the forest-lands, which lay uncultivated for ages, but only to be ejected by the landlords. The Moplah peasants are either leaseholders or are mere wage-labourers who earn their living, cultivating others' land. Quite a large number of Moplahs work in the bamboo forests in the eastern mountain-regions, and since a decade or two, quite a large number of them have been working in the rubber plantations.

In Malabar, the landlords are almost all Hindus, mostly Brahmins. Only in the north Malabar there are a few Moplah landlords. Oppressed and exploited as the Moplah peasants are, they harbour since ages a bitter hatred against their oppressors, the landlords.

Previous to the great peasant revolt of 1921, there were about 50 Moplah peasant uprisings in Malabar. In 17 years, between 1836, to 1853, there were no less than 22 peasant uprisings. Only in a few cases, the apparent causes of these riots were religious. At times, some trouble regarding the site of a mosque or religious conversion led to bloodshed, but in most cases, as we shall see from this account, the causes of the uprisings were purely agrarian.

Centuries ago, the Arab traders from Arabia came to India, and some of them had settled down in the southern coast of Malabar. The Moplahs are the descendants of these Arab traders and the Hindu Nair women. It was Para Nambi, the commander-in-chief of the Raja of Calicut, who allowed the Moplahs for the first time to settle down in the Ernad district and to erect mosques. Malappuram was the headquarters of Para Nambi. In the early years of the 19th century, as a result of a dispute between Para Nambi and the Moplahs, Para Nambi wanted to demolish the mosques. Fierce fight broke out between the troops of Nambi and the Moplahs, as a result of which 47 Moplahs were killed.

The uprising of 1841 was against Terumpalli Namboodri, a landlord who took away by force the leasehold plots of land of the Moplah peasants. The leader of the uprising was Kunjolan, himself a Moplah peasant. The landlord was killed and his house burnt down. The military force hastened to the rescue of the landlord and shot down scores of peasants.

In the uprising of 1843, the Moplah peasants killed one Kaprat Krishna Pannikkar who was the headman of a village, Thurangadi. In the same year, during another uprising, the Moplah peasants murdered one Karukamanna Moose, a Brahmin landlord. In 1851, a peasant uprising reared its head in Kottayam taluka of North Malabar.

A group of Moplah peasants besieged the house of Kalathil Kesavan Thangal, a landlord, and massacred his entire family. In 1880, a band of Moplah peasants attacked Appadurai Pattar and Krishna Pisharodi, both landlords. The peasants were shot dead by the armed guards of the landlords.

In those days, Lord Buckingham was the Governor of Madras. He received an anonymous letter in which the miserable conditions of the Moplah peasants were described in detail. The letter pointed out the many grievances of the Moplah peasants and the cruel exploitation to which the Moplah peasants were subjected by the landed aristocracy. The writer or writers of that letter requested the Governor to pass orders suspending all litigations filed against the Moplah peasants by the landlords. The Governor was also warned that if he did not take these steps, a serious uprising of the Moplah peasants was inevitable. Lord Buckingham took immediate steps. A committee of enquiry was formed with the District Judge and the Collector of Malabar to enquire into the grievances of the peasantry. In their report, both the officials admitted that the tenancy problem was at the root of the trouble. Another committee was set up to make a detailed enquiry into the existing tenancy system, the practice of ejecting the tenants and the vicious system of arbitrary demand for payment by the landlords for the improvements of plots which the tenants had improved by hard labour. An official, Mr. Logan, reported in detail to the government regarding the tenancy system and its abuses. As a result of this report, the Malabar Tenancy Act (Malabar Kuzhikkoor Act) was passed in 1887.

In 1898, in yet another uprising a landlord was killed by the Moplah peasants. It was in February, 1919, that the last peasant uprising prior to the great Moplah rebellion, took place. The uprising took place in a village called Mankatta Pallipuram in the estate of a Brahmin landlord. Chekaji, a Moplah peasant, having failed to pay the rents due to the landlord, was sued by the landlord who in due course secured a decree against him. Not being satisfied with this, the landlord went to the length of putting a stop to the marriage of Chekaji's son, which was settled. Chekaji with a group of Moplah peasants attacked the landlord and his men, and killed them. They in their turn, were shot and killed by the soldiers.

What does this brief account of the most important Moplah uprisings prove? It proves beyond doubt that the oppression of the peasants by the landlords, the unjust tenancy laws, the numerous extortions of illegal dues which the landlords forcibly collected from the peasants, were the causes of these uprisings. Later on, religious fanaticism got mixed up with the main economic factors and the communal people on both sides, being

encouraged by the third party, distorted and misrepresented these agrarian uprisings as communal ones. But as we have already noticed, even the enquiry committees set up by the government were forced to admit that the tenancy system and the tyranny of the landlords, were the real causes of these peasant uprisings.

The great peasant revolt of 1921 came as the culmination of these numerous sporadic peasant uprisings throughout Malabar for half a century. A tenancy movement was started in Calicut and the surrounding districts in October, 1920. The main grievances of the peasantry, which gave rise to this tenancy movement, were the ever-increasing rent and the ejection of the peasants from their holdings by the landlords. This movement was started quite independently of the Congress movement. One of its leaders, Narayan Menon, joined the Congress only after he had severed all connections with the tenancy movement. The tenancy movement created a great stir in South Malabar. Thousands of peasants voiced in hundreds of meetings their demand for a more equitable tenancy system than the existing one, and the total suppression of the unjust extortions by the landlords. The peasants advocated the boycott of the landlords, and also of those persons who sided with the landlords. In numerous meetings, the peasants took the vow that if a landlord ejected a peasant from his land, none would take that plot on lease. Moreover, they would boycott the peasant who did so. They would not also pay rents to the landlords. In some places, the peasants boycotted the landlords socially.

The political situation of South Malabar became surcharged with smouldering flames of peasant unrest. The great peasant masses were stirred to their deepest depths. With each passing day, their demands became more and more insistent and the intensity of the revolutionary fervour of the peasantry became more and more evident. At a peasants' conference held at Manjeri in 1920, resolutions were passed supporting the demands of the peasantry. Peasants unions were organised at several places in Malabar. A Tenant Relief Association was organised in the feudal estate of the Raja of Calicut. When a peasant was thrown out of the estate, and a general strike took place. None went to work in the fields of the landlords. None went to reap and gather their harvest. Naturally, British imperialism could not allow the landlord class, its partner in exploitation of the Indian peasantry and one of its chief ally against revolution in India,

to suffer and be in grave danger, and not extend assistance. British imperialism had to help the landlords for the sake of its own selfish interests. Mr. Thomas, the then Collector of Malabar, promulgated Sec. 144 with the idea of throttling the newly formed peasant unions. This high-handedness on the part of the government, instead of frightening the peasants, had just the reverse effect on them. It made them more resolute in their fight against the landlords. In the meantime, orders restricting the freedom of speeches and of holding meetings were passed by the government against U. Gopala Menon, V. Kunhamed Haji, and other leaders of the tenancy movement.

In Malabar, the Khilafat movement also came into existence at this time, when the tenancy agitation was at its height. The first Khilafat meeting was held at Manjeri in 1920. In order to win over the Moplah peasantry which formed more than three-fourths of the Muslim population of Malabar, the Khilafat movement was forced to lend its support to the tenancy movement. The leaders of both the movements worked hand in hand, and a series of meetings were organised in Ernad and Valluvanad districts, and at Calicut, Tirurangadi, Kondolti, Manjeri, Malapuram and other places.

On February 5, 1921, the District Magistrate of South Malabar, promulgated Sec. 144 prohibiting the peasant organisations from holding meetings. The text of the order of the District Magistrate is worth quoting. It runs thus: "The District Magistrate has received information that it has been decided to hold a series of Khilafat meetings in the Ernad district and that by holding such meetings there is an immediate danger that the feelings of the ignorant Moplahs will be inflamed *against not only the government but also against the Hindu jenmies (jenmies mean landlords) of the district.*" (my emphasis—S.T.)

The District Magistrate who was there to safeguard the interest of the landlords, promulgated Sec 144 in Ernad, and in a number of other districts of Malabar where the peasant unions were formed. Tenancy meetings were forcibly dispersed by the police. At Tirur, the policemen man-handled the peasants who assembled at a meeting in a dastardly manner. At Kalpakancheri, nearly 20,000 people were present at a meeting where the police did all that lay in their power to provoke the people to violence. In a meeting held at Ponani the police beat the people severely. Here the peasant masses retaliated and the police took to their heels. The police violence did not intimidate the peasantry

to submission. On the contrary, the peasants realising quickly the futility and ineffectiveness of passive resistance as tactics of struggle, began to prepare themselves for an armed uprising.

On August 18, 1921, orders were passed for the arrest of M.P. Narayana Menon, Mammad Moosa, K. Abdullah Hazi of Pookkottur, and four others who were connected with the tenancy and the Khilafat movements. Thomas, the District Magistrate of Malabar, himself proceeded to Tirungadi with Police Superintendent Hitchcock, Deputy Police Superintendent Amu, and a batch of one hundred soldiers and special police. On the night of August 19, the District Magistrate reached Tirungadi with his party. A second batch of police and military force came from Malapuram and joined Thomas. On the morning of August 20, 1921, Thomas besieged and raided the mosque of Tirungadi, with the hope of arresting the men against whom warrants of arrest had been issued. Ali Mussaliar, the peasant leader, was not found. The news of the raid spread like wild fire in the countryside, and about 30,000 Moplah peasants armed with all types of weapons, came to defend their leaders. Primitive, fierce fighting ensued. The police opened fire, killing nine men and wounding many more. They arrested 41 persons. A second batch of peasants attacked the police. The police, being hard-pressed, took refuge in the court building. Austin, the Collector; Rowley, the Assistant Superintendent of Police, one military officer and two constables were killed by the peasants. Amongst those whom the police arrested, was Kunikhader, the secretary of the Malabar Khilafat Committee, who was afterwards hanged.

On August, 21, Tottenham, the Superintendent of Police of North Malabar, came to Parapangadi, a small village some two to three miles from Tirunangadi. He found that the railway lines between Parapangadi and Shurnur had been removed, the railway stations destroyed, telegraph wires cut and the bridges destroyed. Post offices, courts, registration offices were also burnt down. A handful of government servants were molested and killed and supporters of the government were warned. Rebellion spread from Tirurangadi to Tirur, Parapangadi, Manjeri, Malapuram, Nilambur, Angadipuram and Cherpulacheri. One of the first acts of the peasant rebels was to proceed to Nilambur on August 21, and plunder the house of the Raja of Nilambur, the wealthiest landlord of Ernad and the Walluvanad districts. The impoverished peasants took away corn and money. For a period of ten days,

the peasant rebels reigned supreme in that area. There was no trace of military or police during those days.

Though during the rebellion and after it, the interested parties backed up by the third party, spread no pains to represent this peasant rebellion as a communal uprising of the Muslims against the Hindus, none could dispute the fact that not a single Hindu was molested or plundered in those days just because he happened to be a Hindu. Some Hindus were killed by the rebels but they were not killed because of their being Hindus. They were killed either because they supported the landlords or the government. Only for this reason, the hirelings of the Raja of Nilambur who opposed the rebels and two supporters of the government, one a munsiff, and the other a retired police inspector, were killed by the Moplahs.

Narayana Menon, who was one of the leaders of the tenancy movement and only later joined the non-cooperation movement as a convert to Gandhism, frankly admitted that the Moplah rebels never attacked the Hindus or robbed them out of communal considerations. When stray cases of looting were brought to the notice of the rebel leaders, they severely punished the men responsible for looting the Hindu houses. Sometimes the punishment amounted to cutting off the hands of such offenders and the what had been looted was immediately returned to the owners.

The Moplah peasant rebels were not anti-Hindu by any means. They were violently anti-landlord and anti-government. Only when the Hindus allied themselves with the police and started giving information to the police about the whereabouts of the rebels who were hiding that the Moplah peasant rebels began looting Hindu houses. Even then, the Hindus who were known to be anti-government were not molested at all. In quite a number of places, the poor Hindu peasants joined the Moplah rebels. Kunna Ahmad Hazi, a famous rebel peasant leader, sent a letter to the "Hindu", the well-known daily of Madras, in which he accused the government for organising attacks on Hindu houses and temples and declared that the Moplah peasants had nothing to do with these attacks on the Hindus.

The landlords in a body supported the government against the peasants. Pumullimana, the richest landlord of Malabar, Pazi Yottumana, Kudallurmana, Chevurmana, Urupulasherimana, and the Raja of Nilambur—all these big landlords of Malabar sided entirely with the government against the peasant-

rebels. So did the rich Moplahs. Not only did they not join in the uprising, but they actively opposed it and helped the government whole-heartedly.

"Yogakshemam," the organ of the Malabar Brahmins, wrote in its leader of January 5, 1922; "Only the rich and the landlords are suffering in the hands of the rebels, not the poor peasants."

One of the very first things that the rebels did at Manjeri, one of the centres of the rebellion, was to loot the bank, take all the ornaments that the poor people had mortgaged, and return the ornaments to them.

Martial law was declared in Malabar on August 21, 1921. On August 26, seventy-five British soldiers and 30 reserved police were engaged in a fight against 10,000 peasants at a place called Pukotur. Five hundred peasants were killed. On the government side, eight persons were killed and nine were seriously wounded. Guerilla fight continued between the forces of the government and those of the rebels at various places. On October 15, 1921, there was a severe fighting between the peasants and the government forces at Vettikatturi, near Nilambur. Kunha Ahmed Haji, the famous peasant leader, led the fight. Fourteen rebels were killed. From Burma, the government brought the Chinkan Chin regiment which reached Malapuram on October 15. The next day, the Gurkha regiment arrived at Tirur. On November 4, 1921, Ali Mussaliar, one of the rebel leaders, and 30 others were tried and sentenced. Thirteen of them were sentenced to death, 15 were sent to Andamans, only three were released on the ground of their being very young. On November 13, fifty-six peasants were killed in a fight. On the next day, 104 were killed, and 14 taken prisoners. Twenty-five rifles were seized and two soldiers were killed in a fight at Pondicat, a tiny village situated some ten miles from Nilambur. At Tamarasheri, 28 troops of the Gurkha regiment were attacked by 2,000 peasants. Fifty-eight rebels rushed into the camps of the soldiers and were killed. About 250 peasants were killed during this fight and one was taken prisoner.

Towards the end of November, the rebellion was crushed. The resistance of the peasants to the tyranny of the landlords and the government broke down before the immensely superior armed forces of the government. On November 28, 1921, about 127 Moplah prisoners were removed from Tirur to Bellari by train. The closed van in which these peasant rebels were thrust in, measured 18 feet in length and 9 feet in width. When the train



arrived at Bellari, it was found that 56 of the prisoners had died because of suffocation and heat.

The martial law summary court which was established on October 3, 1921, tried about 2,830 peasant-rebels, of whom 807 were committed to the sessions. In the jail of Coimbatore alone, 200 rebels were hanged.

The atrocities perpetrated by the soldiers on the unarmed and defenceless men and women left behind in the Moplah villages were appealing. Women were insulted and outraged. Houses were looted and burnt. Men were mercilessly belaboured. The rebels generally retired into the deep forest in the face of the approaching army. Mostly women were left behind in the villages and they were outraged and even murdered by the soldiers. In one particular case an old woman was assaulted and shot. Concentration camps were established where the Moplah women were held as hostages. It must be said in fairness that the charges of brutality were mainly against the Chinkan Chin forces brought from Burma, but not against the British regiment. To strike terror in the hearts of the peasant masses, peasant rebels were hanged on the wayside trees and left dangling there in order to create an "impression" on the populace. Brutal terror was let loose on the peasantry by the military and the police.

The Arya Samajists who, under the protection of the government, went to different centres of the rebellion, took photographs of the few Hindus who were killed by the Moplahs and triumphantly displayed the "horror of Moplah atrocities" to the Hindus. Very significantly, they did nothing to collect materials about atrocities committed by the soldiers, about hundreds of Moplah peasants shot and hanged, and of Moplah women outraged and molested by the soldiers. The Arya Samajists till this day, exhibit these photographs of those Hindus who, by the way, acted as spies and informers to the government which led to the arrest of hundreds of Moplah peasants. Communalism hiding under a humanitarian cloak is always mean and cowardly.

As the peasants' rebellion broke out at a period, when the entire country was in a political ferment due to Gandhiji's non-cooperation movement, one can very pertinently enquire as to what was his attitude towards the peasant uprising.

One Mr. Yakub Hassan wrote a letter to Gandhiji in which he dwelt at length on the misery of the Moplah peasants and the indescribable terror to which they have been subjected by the martial law regime. He writes: "Most of them (i.e. Moplahs)

were cultivating lands under the petty landlords who are almost all Hindus. The oppression of the jemmies (landlords) is a matter of notoriety and long-standing grievances of the Moplahs have never been redressed."

Further, dwelling on the subject of the forcible conversion of the Hindus to Islam, Mr. Hassan observes: "The Hindus have had their vengeance through the military who burnt the Moplah houses and their mosques wholesale. Thousands of Moplahs have been killed, shot, hanged or imprisoned for life and thousands are now languishing in jail. Unfortunate circumstances, the causes of which I need not enter into on this occasion, forced him into the position of a rebel. He has done what any one, Hindu, Muslim, or Christian under the same circumstances and in the same emergency would have done in self-defence and self-interest."

As I have already pointed out, this peasants' rebellion furnishes us with a brilliant illustration of the fact as to how religion is introduced into issues, purely economic, by interested parties. Yakub Hassan has not been very analytical. If he were, he would not have said, "The Hindus have had their vengeance," he would have remarked that the landlords who, in this particular case were Hindus, have had their vengeance on the Moplah peasants for having revolted against the tyranny of the landlords. The "unfortunate circumstances, the causes of which," Yakub Hassan unfortunately did not dwell upon in his letter to Gandhiji are nothing but the most inhuman exploitation of these Moplah peasants carried on by the jemmies (landlords) of Malabar with the support of the government. Yakub Hassan has very rightly remarked that the Moplah peasant "has done what any one, Hindu, Muslim, or Christian, under the same circumstances and in the same emergency would have done in self-defence and self-interest."

Commenting on this letter, Gandhiji wrote an article, "The Starving Moplah," in his "Young India". As is the usual practice with him, in this article, he ignored the economic causes that led to the peasant rebellion and emphasised the religious causes. He writes: "I know that the Hindus feel sore over what the Moplahs in 1921, did to their Hindu neighbour in Malabar." Gandhiji took exception to Yakub Hassan's statement, "he has done what any one, Hindu, Muslim, or Christian would have done" and wrote, "No circumstances and no provocation however grave, could possibly justify forcible conversion."

In a second article, "The Meaning of the Moplah Rising," written on October 20, 1921, Gandhiji wrote: "The Moplah revolt is a test for Hindus and Musalmans. Can Hindu friendship survive the strain put upon it? Can Musalmans in the deepest recess of their hearts approve the conduct of the Moplahs? ...The Hindus must have the courage and the faith to feel that they can protect their religion in spite of such fanatical eruptions. A verbal disapproval by the Musalmans of Moplah madness is no test of Musalman friendship. The Musalmans must naturally feel the shame and humiliation of the Moplah conduct about forcible conversion and looting..."

This is how Gandhiji analysed the causes of the peasants' revolt and this is how he generally analyses political upheavals.

Is there any wonder then, that the Congress dominated and controlled by his followers would do everything in their power to crush the peasants' uprising? Keshav Menon and Madhav Menon, two prominent Congress leaders of Malabar, did all that lay in their power to put a check to the uprising. Narayan Menon, who had been the leader of the tenancy movement, and later severed connections with it and joined the Congress, moved about in the rebel areas with a special passport issued by the government, in order to "pacify" the rebels. Thousands of Moplahs came to meet him and accorded him a most hearty welcome, thinking that he had come to assist them. When they found that he had come to ask the rebel leaders to stop fighting and to surrender themselves to the police, one of the leaders remarked, "We thought you have come to help us, now we realise you are against us." One of the rebel leaders whom Narayan Menon prevailed upon to surrender to the police, requested him to leave that area as soon as possible as his life might be endangered if the peasants came to know about the reason of his visit. Narayan Menon returned happily, fulfilling his mission and the rebel leaders who surrendered to the police following his advice, were executed by the government. But such is the irony of historical justice that as a reward for his faithful services to the government, Narayan Menon was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment on the strength of the accusation by the same police inspector whose life he had saved from the hands of the rebels.

Gopala Menon, in those days a prominent Congress leader of Malabar, also went about the rebel areas with the same object of helping the government to establish law and order. Describing to me the profound impression that the thousands of peasant-

rebels had created on him, he said : "It was worth one's while to take the chance, but consistent with my Gandhian principle I could not do that." So, consistent with his Gandhian principles, Gopala Menon toured in the rebel areas discouraging the rebels in their fight and persuading them to surrender to the government. Other minor Congress leaders also carried on the same noble mission with great zeal.

At least here, non-violence was practiced by the followers of Gandhiji to perfection.

And Gandhiji had every reason to be glad, and he was more than right when in the article, "The Meaning of the Moplah Rising", he wrote, "I am sorry to believe, but it is my belief, that the men on the spot do not wish to give non-cooperators *the credit for peacefully ending the trouble*. (My emphasis—S.T.).

The class-content of Gandhism, hidden behind the thin veil of non-violence, manifested itself in all its ugliness. Terrified by the reality of mass-upheaval, horror-stricken by the method of swift justice that the peasants meted out to spies and informers who happened to be Hindus, alarmed out of their wits by the jacquerie started by the peasants in the estates of the landlords who in this case were also Hindus through mere chance, the Gandhist Congress leaders of Malabar used the dogma of non-violence as a plea to sabotage the uprising. Moreover, they spared no pains to prove that the uprising was communal in character. Class interest, masquerading in the guise of non-violence and communalism, came to the help of British imperialism in which it rightly recognised its main support.

The peasants of Malabar paid dearly for their attempt to end feudal tyranny supported by British imperialism. For a period of five months, the unarmed peasant masses of Malabar fought against the forces of the government, ultimately succumbing to the incomparably superior military power of British imperialism, supported loyally by the Gandhists and by the landlords.