MALABAR JIHAD 1921

Dr. Abraham Yeshuratnam

According to Innes, the origin of the Moplahs (the Muslims of Malabar) can be traced to the arrival of Arab traders to the west coast of India in the ninth century. [1] But Arab traders were sailing to the Malabar Coast from the birth of Islam, and therefore "one can assume that Moslems were living there as merchants no later than the middle of the 7th century.[2] Buchanan met the Ponnani Thangal and has recorded his statement: "The Tangal says that his people are called *Moplaymar* in Malayalam and *Lubbaymar* at Madras; but among themselves they acknowledge no other name than that of Mussulmans."[3]

In August 1921, the Moplahs of Malabar rose against the British government. Historians have divided the origins of the Moplah rebellion into the traditional categories of explanation - economic, social, ideological and political. The Congress Party expressed the view that it was due to police excesses that the Moplah revolts occurred in Malabar. In its resolution the All India Congress Committee condemned "the destruction of life resorted to by the government in the name of peace and order."[4] K.P. Kesava Menon was the Congress leader in the Malabar region and he was also of the view that the Moplah revolts broke out due to police reprisals. "There is no doubt regarding the genesis of the rebellion of 1921. It was born out of police repression."[5] The same view was expressed by *Swarat,* a paper published from Kollam, that "the continuation of the riot for such a

long time and the various hardships suffered by the people are due to the foolhardy, foolish and autocratic harshness and severity on the part of the Government and their underlings." [6] Satidas, an activist of the Servants of India Society contended that the unreformed Hindu society was responsible for these violent acts and questioned, "What right have these lovers of Hindoo nation and protectors of Vedic religion to cry over the Mopla rebellion when they did not try beforehand to … remove the cause of distant pollution which prepared the ground for Mopla atrocities?"[7] Taking a cue from the peasants revolt of Russia, Saumyendranath Tagore. a Bengali Trotskyite, wrote: " The revolt of the peasants in Malabar, in 1921, constitutes, so far as India is concerned, the greatest manifestation of spontaneous mass upheaval in the first quarter of this century, against British imperialism."[8] E.M.S.Namboodiripad, on the other hand, says that it was a *jenmi-kudiyan* (land owner- agricultural labourer) revolt. "It is to the illiterate backward Moplah of the Ernad and Walluvanad taluks that the honour goes of having raised the initial voice of protest against the oppression of the jenmi."[9] But the conclusion of the British officers in Malabar was: "Their intention was, absurd though it may seem, to subvert the British government and to substitute a Khilafat Government by force of arms."[10] Although there has been a plethora of interpretations by political leaders and historians, this paper is geared up to establish the fact that it was religious fanaticism that led to a *jihad* against the British government in Malabar. This study focuses on major events, statements of activists and the blind faith in Islamic ideology of the rebels to prove that it was *jihad* and not any other cause shown by politicians and writers that led to Moplah atrocities.

Moplahs became a force to reckon with in Malabar after the invasions of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. During the Mysorean interlude (1788–1792) there were widespread atrocities against the Hindus and many landowners were forced to take refuge either in forests or in neighboring states. The tenants and the Nair warriors who could not escape were forcibly converted to Islam. As Logan says: “But it was not only the Brahmans, who were thus put in a state of forcible conversion, for, in this same month, a Raja of the Kshatriya family of Parappanad, also” Tichera Terupar, a principal Nayar of Nelemboor” and many other persons, who had been carried off to Coimbatore, were circumcised and forced to eat beef.”[11] Population of the Moplahs also spiked after the Mysorean invasions. When Malabar was brought under the British, the Moplahs did not play any active role in politics, apart from occasional banditti and outrages. Although some political conferences were held in Palakkad, Calicut, Thalasseri and Manjeri, they could only pass resolutions without launching any direct action. What then dragged the Moplahs to politics? Quite surprisingly, events outside Malabar sucked them into the vortex of politics. The Arabic *khalifa* means a representative or successor. And when the Prophet Mohammed died in 632 the title was bestowed on his successor as the leader of the Muslim community, the first of the *Rashidun*, the four so-called "Rightly Guided Caliphs" who ruled for the first three decades of the new Islamic era. The caliphate was one of the oldest Islamic institutions in Islamic history and the Ottoman Sultan was the titular head (Caliph) of the Muslim world. During the First World War, the British and other Allied powers occupied Istanbul and imposed the peace treaty on Turkey. Muslims living worldwide felt that it was an attack on Islam because the Ottoman sultan was also the caliph of the Muslims. A pan-Islamic

crusade, the Khilafat movement, of Muslims emerged to oppose the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. In India, a Khilafat committee was formed under the leadership of Moulana Muhammad Ali, Shoukath Ali, Moulana Azad, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Hasrat Mohani and others. The Ali brothers, Shaukat Ali and Muhammad Ali, became the vociferous leaders of the Khalifat movement. Gandhi wanted to exploit the situation by championing the cause of the Caliph so that he could get the support of the Muslims for the non-cooperation movement launched by him. Gandhi and Shaukat Ali shared a public platform in Calicut on August 18, 1920 attended by a huge crowd of 20,000, mostly Muslims.[12] Gandhi kindled the religious feelings of Muslims by saying, " the Imperial Government have knowingly flouted religious sentiments dearly cherished by the 70 millions Mussalmans ... if the Mussalmans of India offer non-cooperation to Government in order to secure justice on the Khilafat, it is the duty of every Hindu to cooperate with their Moslem brethren."[13] Shaukat Ali urged the Muslims to prepare for a war, ", "If you are strong and capable then it is your bounden duty so long as one Mussalman breathes, to fight the unjust king, the unjust government, that proved to be an enemy to your faith and to your God" [14] The language used by Shaukat Ali was a call for jihad.

In February 1921, leaders of the Congress in Calicut invited Yakub Hassan, prominent Muslim leader in Madras, to Malabar for a series of speeches. Speaking for the Government in the Council of State, New Delhi, H. D. Craik said, 'There is probably no single person who has done more to excite the feelings of the Moplahs than Mr. Yakub Hassan."[15] Upon Hassan's arrival, the District Collector, warning of 'sinister forces at work all over the

district,' imposed an order banning the Khilafat meetings contemplated for Ernad. [16] Hassan and the Malabar Congress leaders declared their intention to defy the ban, whereupon they were arrested and sentenced to six months' imprisonment. Their arrest brought an immediate storm of protest. In defiance of the ban on processions, a crowd of about I2, 000 Mappilias, some armed with sticks and knives, gathered at a Calicut mosque and proceeded along the Beach Road, where they were met by the District Magistrate and the police. The mob dispersed only after two hours' tense confrontation. [17] The following day almost all shops in Calicut observed *harta*l, and with each passing day the *hartal* spread into Malabar, gaining support from Mappillas who had previously held aloof from the Khilafat movement.[18]

This paper does not deal with the military operations of the British. The main objective of this study is to show that the rebels were jihadists. The Khilafat movement itself was a jihad to protect the Caliph from the Allied powers. Although Congress leaders tried to mobilize the support of the Moplahs for their non-cooperation agitation on political grounds, the Moplahs were bent upon converting every agitation into a religious agitation or jihad. As Nirad C. Chaudhuri pointed out: “Malabar massacre of Hindus Inflamed by the preaching of the Khilafat Movement, the Mapillas of Kerala, “notorious for their fanaticism”, perpetrated large-scale murder and arson in the late summer of 1921, the violence directed as much against the Hindus as against the British.”[19] Hindu landlords were targeted not because they were capitalists, as interpreted by Marxists, but they were Hindus.

Arrival of Hassan gave an idea to the District Collector that 'sinister forces' were at work all over the district and therefore he imposed an order banning the Khilafat meetings arranged at Ernad. He feared that a fanatical appeal to religion might prepare the way for something far more serious than the isolated expression of fanaticism that the ordinary Ernad outbreak represents." [20] "There is immediate danger," Thomas wrote, "that the feelings of the more ignorant Moplahs will be inflamed against not only Government, but also against the Hindu *jenmies* of the *taluq*.... that may result in riot and danger to human life.'" [21] During this period the Ali brothers were touring several places inciting the Muslims to carry on a jihad against the British. Their visit to Erode was attended by many Malabar Musaliars.[22] Muhammad Ali's speech in Madras stressing the need for jihad stirred many Muslims against the British. Muhammad Ali's Madras speech was "circulated in pamphlet form in Malabar which ignited the emotion of the Moplahs and therefore the district authorities proscribed it. The Collector had already proscribed an Arabic-Malayalam pamphlet."[23]

The most common meaning of Jihad has been Holy War. And there is a long tradition of Jihad being used to mean a military struggle to benefit Islam. Communal speeches of the Ali brothers and Hassan which were translated into Malayalam and privately circulated to the Moplahs from mosques had already brainwashed them for a jihad. The ground was fertile for a jihad. As for instance, Mappilla-Tiyya tensions erupted in some places, as well, in traditional forms of communal conflict. The Mail reported that in the Mappilla fishing village of Vallayil 'a large crowd of Moplahs, numbers of whom were armed with sticks, gathered this evening before the mosque . . . with the avowed intention of preventing a Tiyya

religious procession from going past the mosque with music.' Violence was avoided only when the Tiyyas took a different route.[24] Peripatetic preachers wandered over the countryside spreading Khilafat propaganda, and rumuors were also circulated widely from mosques - one being that the Afghans were on their way, 'a story arising presumably from Gandhi's statement that a foreign invasion would be welcomed by him.'[25] There were stories, too, that in anticipation of Swaraj, Khilafat leaders had already parceled out the land among poor Mappillas and were only awaiting the movement to take actual possession.[26]

There has been a wide spectrum of views about the nature of Moplah revolts, including Marxists who assert that it was a landlord – peasant (jenmi-kudiyan) agitation. But these theories are thought to lack solid basis in the facts. A hypothesis is never proven correct, nor is a theory ever proven to be true. This paper, therefore, focuses on the statements of eyewitnesses and contemporary day to day media reports to make obvious that the rebellion was a jihad. Madras Mail gives a comprehensive account of the topography of Moplah areas which were affable to organize a jihad. According to the Mail, the Khilafat movement was 'wonderfully organized. Every village has its own Khilafat Association and there is a regular system of inter-communication, whereby men from a considerable area can be rapidly summoned to any point.[27] Hitchcock , District Superintendant of Police, highlights the remarkable communication system that existed in Moplah areas. According to him the communication system constituted a major difference between the Hindu and Mappilla. "The few bazaars that exist are entirely Mappilla and most Mappillas do congregate at least once a week for Friday prayers and often at other times in Mosques. They can therefore form some kind of a public opinion of their own and combine but

the fact that this is done under the cover of religion makes it difficult for Hindu or European even to become aware of it. Except at very occasional festivals the Hindus have no such opportunity of meeting.[28]

It also came to the attention of the police the growth of volunteer movements during the summer and also about the illicit manufacturing of knives and swords. As Goplan Nair points out, “Every Moplah centre had a Khilafat association, with a Moplah president, a Moplah secretary and a majority of Moplah members. The number of such Khilafat committees is not known, but in Case No. 128 of 1922, on the file of the Special Judge, Calicut, it has been mentioned that… there may have been as many as 100 Khilafat Committees formed in the two taluks of Ernad and Ponnani."[29] The Governor in his address pointed out: “As regards Malabar, since martial law has been declared and the military are engaged in the task of restoring law and order, it is not proper for me to go into details. But I wish to emphasize the fact that it was the mere attempt on the part of the district authorities to enforce ordinary process of law that was signal for a sudden and wide spread outbreak of violence directed in the first place against Government, their officers and the whole apparatus of civil administration. Over a wide ·tract of country, in an incredibly short space of time, communications of all kinds were wrecked or obstructed, public offices and courts were attacked, and their records destroyed. Police stations were plundered of their arms and ammunition, and civil government was brought to a complete stand still.”[30] These criminal activities prove that the Moplahs had disassociated themselves from Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement and were functioning independently as jihadists. Right from the days of the birth of Islam, crime and terror have been the essential ingredients for jihad. The

Islamic State's magazine *Rumiyah* has both exalted criminals-turned-jihadis and encouraged the use of crime for jihad. … Aside from lauding criminals-turned-jihadis, the Islamic State has also been encouraging crime for the sake of jihad. [31] The transnational terrorism of the twenty-first century feeds on local and regional conflicts, without which most terrorist groups would never have appeared in the first place. Local and regional events in Malabar such as the installation of Ali Musaliar as king on August 2, 1921 at the Jamad Mosque, Variankunnath Kunhammad Haji styling himself as Raja of the Hindus, Amir of the Mohammedans and Colonel of the Khilafat Army. He wore a fez-cap, wore the Khilafat uniform and badge and he had a sword in his hand. He enjoyed absolute authority and he named Ernad and Walluvanad as his kingdom. It was at this juncture that the British intelligence got reports that Ali Muslaiar was instigating his followers in and around Tirurangadi to start a jihad against the British. News was spread by Ali Musaliar that the Amir of Afghanistan was about to invade India and that with the assistance of Gandhi and Ali Brothers they would establish the Khilafat rule in the country. Khilafat volunteers were recruited and made to swear on the Holy Koran that they would be ready to die for the cause of the Khilafat. Ali Musaliar also made his volunteer corps parade throughout the locality, armed and in their uniforms, and such demonstrations added to the strength of this mischievous movement."[32] It becomes quite transparent from the speeches and activities of Ali Musaliar that he was embarking on a jihad to establish a caliphate in Malabar. The army surrounded the Tirurangadi mosque on the evening of 30th August 1921. Even though Ali Musaliar and other Khilafate leaders exhorted their ranks to fight till death, which thousands did and died as a result, the

leaders – Ali Musaliar of Tirurangadi, Variankunnath Kunhamed Haji and Chembrasseri Tangal – meekly surrendered to the British.

This paper is confined to focus on the jihad aspect of the rebellion and does not want to go into all the details of the conflicts between the British and the Moplahs. On 14 March 1922, Major General Stuart wrote, "the rebellion has lasted six months, during which period the Moplahs controlled large areas of Malabar…the rebellion has cost 10,000 lives." Official figures, however, put the numbers at 2,337 rebels killed, 1,652 injured and 45,404 imprisoned. Unofficial estimates put the number imprisoned at almost 50,000 of whom 20,000 were deported, mainly to a penal colony on the Andaman Islands, while around 10,000 disappeared.[33] A feature that has been manifestly common to all these Moplah revolts in 1921 is that they have been one and all marked by the most virulent fanaticism, and this, there can be no doubt, has sprung from their firm determination to carry on a jihad against the British.



Captured Moplahs taken to the court by the native police for trial.

Jihad, also spelled jehad, ("struggle," or "battle"), a religious duty imposed on Muslims to spread Islam by waging war; jihad has come to denote any conflict waged for principle or belief and is often translated to mean "holy war."[34] The following atrocities committed by the Moplahs show that it was not a peasant revolt against landowners as interpreted by Marxist writers but everything in this case, however sordid, however shocking and revolting to the common instinct of civilized peoples, reveals it was nothing but a jihad. Eye witness accounts given by Gopalan Nair confirm that it was a jihad in all its nakedness.: "These are classified below:- (a) Brutally dishonouring women, (b) Flaying people alive, (e) wholesale slaughter of men, women and children, (d) Forcibly converting people in thousands, and murdering those who refused to be converted (e) Throwing half-dead

people into wells, and leaving the victims for hours, to struggle till finally released from their sufferings by death. (f) Burning a great many and looting practically all Hindu and Christian houses, in the disturbed area, in which even Mopla women and children took part, and robbing women, of even the garments on their bodies, in short reducing the whole non-moslem population to abject destitution (g)Cruelly insulting the religious sentiments of the Hindus, by desecrating and destroying numerous temples, in the disturbed area, killing cows within the temple precincts, putting their entrails on the holy images and hanging the skulls on the walls and roofs."[35]

A vital factor that many historians have ignored to highlight is the remarkable growth in jihadism as a rebel ideology, a military guerrilla force and a regional terrorist menace after the Mysorean invasions. While reviewing the jihadist violence in Malabar, the Mail reported: "In the present instance it would appear that in the opinion of the District Magistrate the cutting of telegraph wires, the blocking of roads, the destruction of railways and the murders, looting and rioting which took place at Tirurangadi to his knowledge and were credibly reported to have taken place elsewhere, constituted a situation which the. Civil authorities were powerless to control, even with the help of such Military Force as were available."[36] Musaliar's activities are similar to many modern jihadist groups who seek to establish Islamic states in their respective countries of origin, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Throughout Islamic history, wars against non-Muslims, even though with political overtones, were termed jihads to reflect their religious flavour. This was especially true in the 18th and 19th centuries in Muslim Africa south of Sahara, where religiopolitical conquests were seen as

jihads.. Ali Musaliar and other Khilaphat leaders were planning to seize power taking advantage of the weak position of the police. My finding is that Ali Musaliar's authority in Tirurangadi was a religiopolitical conquest of that region and therefore it was a jihad to establish a local Caliphate like Boko Haram's authority in parts of Nigeria. The British were also getting intelligence reports about the planned attack. As Evans says: "I think it improbable that any definite date had been settled for a general rising or that any detailed plan of campaign had been drawn up; but I think that by the middle of August at least Ali Musaliar and other leaders thought that their organization was sufficiently advanced to enable them to be sure that when a message was sent round there would be simultaneous outbreaks on uniform lines throughout Ernad and most of Walluvanad and Ponnani.' Evans further clarified that the rumors that the Mambram mosque had been destroyed and that the Collector had been killed were of deliberate design by Ali Musaliar."[37]

EMS Nambudiripad was the first to highlight the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal character of the Malabar rebellion. Conversely, Kelappan views the rebellion as religious fanaticism.[38] The controversy centers on evaluating Moplah mutiny that amplifies British crimes and glorifies Moplah fighters while dismissing the vital part Moplah leaders played in ethnic cleansing of Hindus in Ernad and Walluvanad districts. Revisionist historians turn a blind eye to the shocking events in Malabar such as the installation of Ali Musaliar as king on August 2, 1921 at the Jamad Mosque, the emergence of Variankunnath Kunhammad Haji who styled himself Raja of the Hindus, Amir of the Mohammedans and Colonel of the Khilafat army, Seethikoya Thangal of Kumaramputhur who declared himself as the "king of Mannarghat" and some other leaders like Chembrasseri Thangal who had

targeted Hindus and killed them. Attempts are now being made by communalists, nationalists and Marxists to whitewash all the shocking events of what went on in Malabar in the early phases of the Moplah rebellion and to erase the racist and bloody history of the District. Indian leftist perception of the Moplah agitation is reflected in the Soviet Encyclopedia – "the Moplah rebellion is an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist uprising of the Moplahs, the Muslim population of the Malabar district of Madras Province in British India, during 1921. The majority of the Moplahs were tenant-farmers and agricultural labourers. Their rebellion was one of the major peasant uprisings during the revolutionary movement of 1918–22."[39] But historical events do not comport with this biased, one-sided narrative of leftist writers. There are hundreds of recorded instances of Moplahs assaulting Thiyyas and Nairs who formed the bulk of peasants and tenant farmers population. Refugee and relief camps organized by the government and charitable societies after routing Moplah jihadists were crowded with Nair and Thiyya victims. As Logan points out from Collectorate records: "the country [Malabar] was split into a number of Kingdoms and principalities, a prey to the bigotry of its late Mohamedan conquerors abandoned by its principal landholders, and distracted by the depredations and rapacity of the Mappila banditty".[40] Fanatical Moplahs attacked Nair and Thiyya peasants and it is preposterous to call Moplah agitation as a jenmi-kudiayan (landlord-peasant) uprising. Most leftist and nationalist historians have failed to realize that after the Mysorean invasions most of the Nair landholders were reduced to the status of landless peasants and agricultural laborers. There were some Nair landlords (jenmies) and they were attacked not because they were land owners but mainly because they were Hindus. Revisionists quote this attack

to claim that the Moplah rebellion was a peasants revolt. But the majority of Nair population was agricultural farmers. They lost their superior economic status during the Mysorean occupation of Malabar. And more pointedly, scholars now fear that they risk reprisal for not toeing the official line — for deriding leftists and nationalists for their historical distortions. Revisionist tendency of certain historians is to omit and prioritize events and phenomena on the basis of bias. They have wantonly omitted horrible incidents while writing about Moplah rebellion just to appease communal leaders and political parties. As for instance, they have been whitewashing the fanatical nature of the rebellion which the Reporter of the Mail in his daily dispatch from Calicut has pointed out: "In point of magnitude, organisation, and the atrocities committed by the rebels, this rising in the Moplah country is unparalleled in the history of Malabar, or for the matter of that in the history of the whole of India."[41] Gopalan Nair confirms this report while publishing the memorandum submitted by the women of Malabar to Lady Reading. How can biased historians deny the agony and tribulation suffered by Nair and Thiyya women which they have expressed in their memorandum presented to Lady Reading? I am not giving the full text for want of space, but only a paragraph to show the gravity of the crime committed by the Moplah fanatics. "Of the many wells and tanks filled up with the mutilated, but often only half dead bodies of our nearest and dearest ones who refused to abandon the faith of our Fathers; of pregnant women cut to pieces and left on the roadside and in the jungles, with the unborn tube protruding from the mangled corpses; of our innocent and helpless children torn from our arms and done to death before our eyes and of our husbands and fathers tortured, flayed and burnt alive ; of our helpless sisters forcibly carried away from the midst of kith and kin and

subjected to every shame and outrage which the vile and brutal imagination of these inhuman hell hounds could conceive of"[42] Revisionist historians, however, deny these horrors of Moplah revolts. As psychiatrist Paul Appelbaum says: "Denial is the 'deliberate', often psychologically motivated, neglect of information that would be too upsetting or anxiety provoking to allow into one's belief system."[43] Writers of certain schools of thought deliberately deny the shocking crimes committed by the rebels out of fear and also just to appease communal and political forces. All that said, there is no doubt that denialism is dangerous because historians manipulate or misrepresent historical accounts to achieve political ends. Some revisionist writers who ignore Moplah atrocities have been repeatedly slammed for bias, questionable handling of facts and reliance on fakes. But their 'belief system' is so impregnable that nothing can shatter it to accept the reality.

Gandhi committed a huge blunder by supporting the Khilafat movement which later sowed the seeds for the demand of Pakistan. What is more, when the Moplah jihad against the British supported by Gandhi was in full swing in Malabar to bolster the authority of the Caliph, in Turkey liberal forces were on the march to remove the corrupt Caliph. The caliphate was finally extinguished by Kemal Ataturk in 1924. He believed the abolition of the institution was essential to his campaign to turn what was left of the empire into a 20th Century secular nation state. The last Ottoman caliph was expelled from Istanbul to live out a life of cultured exile in Paris and on the Cote d'Azur. To recap, Marxists like Saumyendranath Tagore interprets the Moplah rebellion as peasants revolt against British imperialism, nationalists like K.P. Kesava Menon interprets it as freedom struggle, but my finding , however, is that it was a jihad to establish an independent

Khilafat kingdom in Malabar. In this context, the title for the rebellion commonly used by various schools of thought such as 'Peasant Revolt in Malabar, 1921' (Leftists), 'Moplah Rebellion, 1921' (British), 'Malabar Rebellion, 1921' (Nationalist) , is to be changed to Malabar Jihad 1921 on the basis of some concrete evidences catalogued in this study.

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