The Malabar rebellion is a layered story with multiple strands that defy simplistic narrations

Erasing any of these strands or experiences — the anti-colonial impulse, religious content, agrarian moorings, police brutality — would result in an incomplete, lopsided picture of the event with potential for dangerous interpretations in our fraught present.

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The rebels captured after a battle with British troops. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

The Malabar rebellion, also called Mappila revolt, continues to be a contested and polarising event nearly a hundred years after it took place. It has now grabbed the headlines after a film project on one of the rebel leaders, Variyankunnathu Kunjahammed Haji, was announced. One right-wing group in Kerala has announced that it will contest the attempts to "glorify" Haji and the revolt with a

year-long campaign “to expose the atrocities committed on Hindus” during the rebellion. Three more films are reportedly in the works — the upcoming centenary of the rebellion is sure to offer political and commercial opportunities.

The rebellion was a remarkable event that saw people in southern Malabar, predominantly Muslims, wage an armed struggle against the British for nearly six months beginning August 1921. In sociologist D N Dhanagare’s words, “gross neglect of the basic tenurial security, the deterioration of landlord-tenant relations and the political alienation of the poor peasantry were the important formative conditions” of the rebellion. According to Dhanagare, three different political movements merged to trigger the rebellion — one of these, the tenancy movement, was rooted in local agrarian grievances (particularly in south Malabar); the other two were the Khilafat (Caliphate) movement and the Non-Cooperation movement, launched jointly by the All-India Khilafat Committee and the Indian National Congress. The talukas where the Khilafat agitation turned violent, had a significant presence of Muslims, who nursed political, administrative, economic and religious grievances against the British — Malabar had witnessed over three dozen Muslim peasant revolts against the British and landlords in the 19th century. The tenancy movement in the 1910s had foregrounded the agrarian issues that affected the peasants, many of them Muslims, causing unease among

the landlords, most of them upper caste Hindus, and the colonial administration.

However, the turning point was the visit of Maulana Shaukat Ali and Mahatma Gandhi to Malabar in August 1920, which attracted Muslims in large numbers to join the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements. By February 1921, the British authorities started to ban Khilafat meetings and even arrested senior Congress-Khilafat leaders. The crackdown transformed the character of the movement and influenced local leaders and cadres, whose notions of justice was shaped by religious values and memories of past resistance to the colonial forces, to resist the British forces with arms.

The rebellion started on August 20 when the army and police raided the Tirurangadi mosque, an important religious centre headed by Ali Musaliyar, who soon emerged as a leader of the rebels. Attempts by senior Congress-Khilafat leaders such as Muhammed Abdurahman Saheb, Moidu Moulavi, K M Moulavi, M P Narayana Menon and K Madhavan Nair to pacify the rebels failed. Following the Tirurangadi incident, Khilafat workers mobilised across the region. They were targeted by the army, which triggered more mobilisations and violence. The rebels targeted public officials and buildings, and those who collaborated with the administration. The rebels initially forced the British administration to flee from the region, but army and police returned with reinforcements to put down the

rebels.

The anarchy that followed the collapse of administrative and leadership structures was exploited by rabid and criminal elements among the rebels to further sectarian and communal agendas, including destruction of property, killings and forced conversions of Hindus.

The religious edge in the Khilafat agitation — Khalifat movement demanded the restoration of the Turkish Caliphate, which was for many Muslims both a temporal and spiritual institution — had turned many Hindus lukewarm to the rebellion, and later, when the rabid voices gained prominence, to side with the British administration, which furthered the communal divide. Scholar M Gangadharan has argued that many rebels harboured the suspicion that Hindus, including Congress workers, could be sympathetic to the British and whenever the rebels turned into mobs took to violence against non-Muslims. However, Gangadharan, historian K N Panikkar and others point out that the top rebel leaders including Ali Musaliyar and Variyankunnathu Kunjahammed Haji discouraged and opposed forcible conversions and looting and destruction of property belonging to non-Muslims. R H Hitchcock, the police official who led the British forces against the rebels, was to write that neither was the rebellion brought about only by Muslims nor all Muslims were supportive of the rebels.

The British authorities put down the rebellion in the most

brutal manner — official estimate is 2,337 rebels killed, 1,652 wounded and no less than 45,000 taken as prisoners. Sumit Sarkar in Modern India quotes an Arya Samaj source that claimed about 600 Hindus were killed and 2,500 forcibly converted during the rebellion. Unofficial estimates say that nearly 10,000 rebels were killed and thousands of their family members and relatives deported to the Andamans. Police brutality in Malabar was most visible in the Wagon Tragedy incident (November 1921), in which 67 prisoners died of suffocation after they were forced to travel in a closed railway carriage.

There were few gains from the rebellion whereas it adversely affected Hindu-Muslim unity, in Malabar and beyond, and reinforced the stereotype of the Muslim as a religious fanatic that British administrators, who wrote about the Mappila agrarian revolts of the 19th century, had created.

The Malabar rebellion is a layered story with multiple strands that defy simplistic narrations. Erasing any of these strands or experiences — the anti-colonial impulse, religious content, agrarian moorings, police brutality — would result in an incomplete, lopsided picture of the event with potential for dangerous interpretations in our fraught present. Surely, uncritical valorisation of the rebellion or spinning a singular Hindu victimhood narrative cannot do justice to the complex tragedy that the rebellion was.

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