Fact checking BJP's Kummanam Rajasekharan: Was the Malabar rebellion a case of Jihad?

The Malabar rebellion, also known popularly as the Moplah rebellion, was an armed revolt staged by the Mappila Muslims of Kerala against the British authorities and their Hindu allies in 1921.

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Written by | New Delhi | Updated: October 12, 2017 3:43:11 pm

The Malabar rebellion, also known popularly as the Moplah rebellion, was an armed revolt staged by the Mappila Muslims of Kerala against the British authorities and their Hindu allies in 1921. (Wikimedia Commons)

Kerala BJP president Kummanam Rajasekharan proclaimed on Monday that the Malabar rebellion of 1921 was the first case of Jihadi massacre in the state. Rajasekharan went on to note that to consider the large scale murder of Hindus to be part of the freedom struggle is an insult to history. "If it were an agitation

against British rule, why were thousands of people butchered and temples destroyed? It is high time we stopped glorifying this massacre, depicting it as freedom struggle. If anyone is given pension on behalf of this rebellion, it should be given to those who had to flee their homes during the riot and the dependents of the victims of the jihadi massacre," said the BJP leader.

Kerala BJP president Kummanam Rajasekharan. (File Photo)

The Malabar rebellion, also known popularly as the Moplah rebellion, was an armed revolt staged by the Mappila Muslims of Kerala against the British authorities and their Hindu allies in 1921. The six-month-long rebellion that led to the loss of about 10,000 lives, out of which 2,339 were rebels, is often perceived to be one of the first cases of nationalist uprisings in Southern India. However, the episode also remains a highly debated topic among historians, as to what the real motive of the revolt was.

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While there are some who call it a case of religious fanaticism, there are others who look at it as an instance of struggle against British authority, and then there are others who perceive the Malabar rebellion to be a peasant revolt against unfair practices of the landlords.

While historians continue to debate on the matter, the broad consensus on the episode notes it to have started off as a struggle against political power, which later took on a communal colour.

The historical background

In order to better understand the Moplah rebellion, we need to first reflect upon the social composition of Malabar in the early twentieth century and the historical processes that came to affect the Mappilas. The Mappilas or the Muslims of Kerala trace their historicity to the 9th century when Islam was introduced to the west coast of India by Arab traders. Originally the community consisted of either Arab traders, or descendants of Arabs or those from the lower rungs of the Hindu social order who converted to Islam.

In the sixteenth century when Portuguese traders arrived on the Malabar coast, they noted the Mappilas to be a mercantile community concentrated in urban centres and fairly segregated from the local Hindu population. However, with the rise in Portuguese commercial power, the Mappilas found themselves a competitor and increasingly started moving inland in search of new economic opportunities. The shifting of the Mappilas led to a clash of religious identities both with the local Hindu population and the Portuguese.

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During the invasions of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, the local Hindu population in Malabar found themselves attacked and uprooted, thereby maintaining a sense of security for the Mappilas. However, soon after when the British took over, the domination of the Hindu upper castes was not just re-established, but also heightened. In this scenario, the Mappilas soon found themselves at the mercy of their Hindu landlords (locally referred to as janmi) who were sustained by the British authority as their agents. Historian Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. notes that "reduced to insecure tenancy, vulnerable to rack renting and eviction at the hands of the Hindu landlords sustained by British courts, the Mappilas responded in a series of outbreaks."

Soon after when the British took over, the domination of the Hindu upper castes was not just re-established, but also heightened. (Wikimedia Commons)

By 1921, when the Malabar rebellion took place, the number of Mappilas, particularly in Southern Malabar had undergone a drastic increase. As explained by historian David Arnold in his work, a large share of this increase came not from normal demographic growth, but from voluntary conversion of low caste Hindus, who formed

the lowest rungs of the agricultural society. By 1921 therefore, in most districts of southern Malabar, the Mappilas were the majority of the population. For instance, in Ernad taluk, they formed 60 per cent of the total population.

With a large population of Mappilas facing the wrath of an unfair economic order sustained by the British, the ground was ripe for a major uprising to take place.

The incident

By 1920 when the nationalist movement was gaining momentum, little impact of it could be seen among the Malabari Muslims. The Congress was still seen as a predominantly upper caste Hindu organisation. Things changed in 1920, when Gandhi decided to combine the call for Swaraj with the Khilafat movement that sought to preserve the Ottoman Empire and authority of the Turkish Caliph as the spiritual leader of the Islamic world.

On August 18, 1920, Gandhi along with Shaukat Ali (the leader of the Khilafat movement in India) visited Calicut to spread the combined message of non-cooperation and Khilafat among the residents of Malabar. “If the Mussalmans of India offer non-cooperation to the government in order to secure justice on the Khilafat, it is the duty of every Hindu to cooperate with their Muslim brethren,” announced Gandhi in a speech at Calicut in front of a crowd of 20,000.

In response to Gandhi's call, a Khilafat committee was formed in Malabar in June 1920, which became increasingly active. By January 1921, the Mappilas, under their religious head Mahadum Tangal of Ponnani pledged support to the non-cooperation movement.

In the next six months, the rebellion spread over a large portion of the southern Malabar region, leading to the death of approximately 10,000 people. (Wikimedia Commons)

The time when the Khilafat call had come to the Mappilas was also the moment when the agrarian situation in Malabar had reached a point of complete despair with the low-class tenants suffering under the oppressive measures of the landlords who were patronised by the British. In this situation of agrarian crisis, the Congress reached out to the Mappila cultivators to actively support both the agrarian reforms and, in the name of Khilafat, for independence. As noted by historian Thomas Shea, "these efforts proved tragically successful...Egged on by the more fanatical of their leaders, the Moplah peasants transformed what had begun as a series of well-organised boycotts of evicting landlords into a large scale spontaneous insurrection against all forms of authority-Hindu landlords as well as the British Raj."

In the next six months, the rebellion spread over a large portion of the southern Malabar region, leading to the death of approximately 10,000 people. In the later stages

of the movement, the target was exclusively the Hindu landlords, many of whom were forcibly uprooted and converted. The British government responded to the movement with much aggression, bringing in Gurkha regiments to suppress it and imposing martial law. A noteworthy event of the British suppression was the wagon tragedy when approximately 60 Mappila prisoners on their way to a prison, suffocated to death in a closed railway goods wagon.

Wagon Tragedy Memorial, Tirur (Wikimedia Commons)

The interpretation

Historians and politicians have for long debated on the nature of the Malabar rebellion. In the immediate aftermath, the incident was strongly condemned by the Congress leaders who put the blame completely on the shoulders of the government officials. As per the Congress, non-cooperation and Khilafat were in no way responsible for the brutality of the movement. Rather it was the official treatment of the Mappila prisoners, which aggravated the movement. “It was born out of police repression. Its chief cause was the excessive violence used by the authorities to suppress the Khilafat movement, and not any Jenmi- (kanamdar) conflict or dispute regarding mosque,” explained Malabar Congress leader K. P. Kesava Menon.

Others like communist leader Saumyendranath Tagore

called the revolt to be “the greatest manifestation of spontaneous mass upheaval in the first quarter of this century, against British imperialism.” Communist stalwart E M S Namboodiripad, however, perceived the rebellion to be a voice of protest against the oppression of the landlords (jenmi).

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The religious context of the rebellion was definitely not lost in the interpretation. Writing in the early 1980s, historian Stephen Fredrick Dale had in fact interpreted the Malabar rebellion as a form of Jihad. According to Dale, for the Mappilas the Islamic tradition of Jihad (holy war) was embellished by the long history of conflict with Europeans and Hindus. He believed that there was no clear connection between economic grievance and revolt. Rather the general Islamic belief of Jihad and shahid that underlay the activities of the Mappilas.

Dale, however, has been opposed strongly by several other historians who look into the economic or rural nature of the revolt. Explaining in thorough detail, the class divisions inherent in early twentieth century Malabar society, historian David Arnold wrote that the Mappila rebellion was neither solely economical nor religious, but rather a combination of both and need to be located as part of the larger trend of peasant protests that took

place all over India in the 19th and 20th centuries.

MGS Narayanan, a former chairman of ICHR

In recent years though, historians have reached a broad consensus about the movement starting off largely as a protest against British authorities and culminating into a savage form of communal violence. “It started as a protest against British authorities so it was part of the freedom struggle. However, since the British had appointed high caste Hindus in high positions as they needed their support, therefore the protest soon turned against the Hindus as well,” says Prof M G S Narayanan, an authority on Kerala history. Asked whether the BJP is justified in calling it an instance of Jihad, Narayanan says “the term Jihad was not in use in those days. To coin it in reference to the movement is to introduce a term that did not exist back then. In that sense it is unhistorical.”



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