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Perspectives on 'Crowd' Actions in the Tirurangadi Mambram Mosque Attack (1921 August)

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Back ground

There was a widespread perception on the economic losses of Britian during the first world war was hotly discussed among the people. The account of a few soldiers who participated in the world war was highly contributed to this perception. Along with this the people also believed that Britain no longer had the strength to maintain its power in India[1]. The alliance of Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movement was initiated by M.K Gandhi in 1919 was another key factor which contributed to the British anxiety towards the people in Malabar.

The Khilafat movement was deeply influenced by M.K Gandhi during 1920, August 18, ten days after the treaty of Severs which projected the partition of Ottoman empire, Gandhi and Shaukat Ali appeared in a rally in Calicut[2]. Gandhi suggested the lawyers, students and other followers of him to give up their practice in court and students to leave the school and return all honorary titles as a part of the Non-Cooperation movement[3]. At the same time Shaukat Ali dwelt mainly on the Khilafat Issues[4]. After the meeting in Calicut a spontaneous formation of Khilafat Committee was made in Malabar due to the sudden excitement towards the new ideas propagated by Gandhi and Shaukat Ali[5]. Most of them were quickly atrophying due to the lack of fund and other organisational issues[6]. But in Manarghat in the east and Tirurangadi in the West had a continues life for Khilafat Committee[7].

By 1921, the colonial authorities recognized the impact of Khilafat and the Non-Cooperation movement among Malabar's common people and realized how crucial it was to steer clear of these gatherings and organizations. The fear and anxiety towards the alarming number of people who uniting against them was the

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underlaying reason behind the prohibition of such meetings. In late January a meeting had been organised in Calicut which attracted 6000 people, with the leadership of U. Goplan Menon and Madhavan Nair[8]. Naturally the united nature of the meeting and the huge number of people who assembled in calicut created a fear in colonial authority they had foreseen a future rebellion against them and issued an order against the leaders like U.Goplan Menon and Madhavan Nair of Khilafat movement from organizing meeting in Eranad[9]. similar meetings were prohibited again in February 14th in Parappur near Kottakkal and on 16th in Calicut. In Calicut meeting, Janab Yakkub Husain was agreed to attend[10]. But Yakkub Husain was not willing to accept the banned order issued by the government as a result along with the Congress leaders like U. Gopalan Menon and K. Madhavan Nair he was arrested and sentenced to six-month imprisonment[11]. on August 15, 1921, the leaders who had been wrongfully imprisoned received a remarkable reception from the general population. K. Madhavan Nair recalls seeing something like this.

"When they released from Kannur jail a lot of preparations were made in advance at Kannur, Thalassery and Kozhikode to receive them. After attending a huge procession and meetings in 15 and 16 the leaders reached Kozhikode in 17th August. The celebration was at least roughly comparable to the one that Gandhi had visited in Kozhikode during 1920. It shows up the interest of the general public towards Khilafat Movement and the resentment of the people against the actions of Collector Thomas……the procession, marching through the streets of the city, decorated with flags, banners, finally reached before the Collector's headquarters, the Huzur Kacheri about noon. The 'Crowd' wild with joy, applauded and cheered when they saw Mr. Thomas standing on the Varanda above the Huzur Kacheri. This caused some of us great grief and shame. We immediately stopped this applause, feeling very sorry for the people. But there is no doubt that this insult was felt like a sharp arrow for the proud Collector."[12]

'Crowd' played a significant part in the Khilafat uprising and the Yakub Hussains arrest issue. The authorities had a great deal of excitement and worry due to the unsettling number of people who participated in these agitations, which led to the restriction or prohibition of such meetings. They were given several orders to ban

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them in an attempt to prevent them from organizing such a large number of people. It was in this background the Tirurangadi Mosque attack was taken place.

Tirurangadi mosque attack of 1921 August.

The evolution of the society to the present stage owe greatly to the belief in 'Crowd' power. As in history, the 'Crowd' has always been an evolving phenomenon for psychology, sociology and other major disciplines. Different 'Crowd' formations have been observed throughout history, based on particular political and socio-economic conditions. Each 'Crowd' formation may vary because of its difference in the context in which they originated. For instance, in a particular historical context, a 'Crowd' may behave passively at first, but it may also turn aggressive in a different context of event. Thus, nature determines how a 'Crowd' transforms into a revolutionary mob or a hostile being. In this instance, we can see that the 'Crowd' played a crucial part in the attack on the Tirurangadi mosque. The Tirurangadi issue was taken place by the spread of rumours around Ali Musaliar (Khilafat leader) and the famous Mambram mosque. This attack was an open attack by the 'Crowd' towards the British force against their depressive rule in Malabar. The agitation's leaders recognized the value of mobilizing the 'crowd' against the colonial people and demonstrated the crowd's might in front of the British as a political tactic for facing them. The leaders identified that keeping of 'Crowd' in the front layer of every agitation make their tasks easy. Historian George Rude brought forward the similar point regarding the 'Crowd's' actions during the Bastille attack[13]. The people who united in such a huge and single body also created tension and fear among the colonial government and they used every opportunity to dismantle the 'Crowd'.

The Tirurangadi problem was brought to light by E.F. Thomas's plans to suppress the Khilafat movement's impact and the people of Malabar's collective struggle against the British administration. He received consent for a number of instructions, including the arrest of Khilafat leaders and the search for weapons in Khilafat districts. Collector Thomas, District Superintendent Hitchcock, Deputy Superintendent Amu and other officials arrived Tirurangadi with all kinds of preparations on 1921 August 20[14]. They surrounded the 'Kizhakepalli'[15] with the intention of capturing Alimusaliar, a sixty-year-old man described as 'dangerous' by

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the British authority[16]. But they could not find him. All the flags, boards and spinning wheels in the Khilafat office were smashed[17]. Following this incident a number of rumours were spread all over the region that, Mambram mosque was demolished by the Collector and his force and they came to caught all the khilafat members in Malabar etc. Here, rumours play a crucial role in shaping and diverting an occurrence[18]. After examining the colonial and indigenous accounts of the attack on the Tirurangadi mosque, one of the key factors we can draw is that each account contains contradictions. Colonial reports emphasized the criminal, destructive, impulsive and spontaneous nature of 'Crowd', at the same time the participance of the attack illustrated a rational, organised behaviour of 'Crowd' as well.

The 'Kizhakepalli' mosque search on August 20th 1921 was explained by E.F Thomas in his telegram to Madras like this., "the operation was successful as surprise, but unsuccessful as regards arrest, only three of the 24 wanted men were apprehended". Later he mentioned in a report that, "during the search for arms and the wanted men, the 'Kizhakkepalli' mosque was entered by Mappila Police officers who before entering removed their boots. The Mambram mosque on the other side of the river, was not approached by anyone. News of the actions at Tirurangadi had quickly spread in to the countryside, and it was fed by the rumour that the Mambram mosque had been attacked. At 11.45 am, word came that a crowd of 2000 Mappilas from outlying villages was advancing on Tirurangadi from the West"[19]. Here E.F. Thomas may purposefully emphasize this act of removing their boots, before entering the "Kizhakkepalli" to demonstrate their composure and discipline and to demonstrate that they had no intention of physically attacking the residents after he realised that the incident turned in to a rebellion like character. Later the troops went out to meet and disperse the 'Crowd' they advanced steady and refused to heed the call to disperse. The police then charged with fixed bayonets and met by stick. The Mappilas yielded only in the face of police fire, with 9 known causalities[20]. Simultaneously a 'Crowd' estimated 2000 attacked the remaining police and the troops, they "terribly mutilated and hacked" the bodies of two British officers".[21] The identical incident was reported in the "Madras Mail" on August 24 and 26. E.F. Thomas's account on the 24th claimed that there was little provocation, but on the 26th, he reiterated that there were hostility and an armed conflict[22].

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Diwan Bahadur G. Gopalan Nair also provide us similar explanation on the event. He mentioned that, "between the hours 11.30 – and 2 pm a determined attack was made from two sided on the force of police and troops by armed bands coming from Tanur, Parappanangadi, and adjoining amsom on the West, and from Tirurangadi and amsoms on the east, as far as Ponmala and Kottakkal. The attacks were beaten off, but two officers were surrounded and butchered by the mob"[23].

Mr. F.B. Evans Malabar Collector' s note on the Tirurangadi incident also light upon the irrational and spontaneous nature of the 'Crowd'. Additionally, he included the Khilafat flag's effect and its rise as a driving force behind the 'crowd's' general violent behaviour. He also accused the 'Crowd' for starting the first fire, which eventually sparked a massive uprising.

He said that., 'when heard a large number of 'Crowd' that coming from Parappanangadi towards the force, a party of reserve constables under Mr. mainwarning and Hitchcock left to meet them, 2 miles from Tirurangadi they met more than a 'Crowd' of 3000 armed with knives and sticks. There was a standard bearer with a Khilafat flag. Kunji Khadir was the leader. The Mappilas attacked the troops, who fired in return[24].

K. Madhavan Nair made a thorough analysis of the attack on the Tirurangadi mosque. He claims that in Tirurangadi following the circulation of rumours about the demolition of Mambrampalli and the arrest of Alimusaliar people from several locations, including Thanur, Tirur, and Kottakkal were started to travel towards Tirurangadi. British officials were in a state of numbness and were terrified to see people moving in such a large body. Some Mappilas were said that, the British Officials who asked the 'Crowd' that came from east to sit down, and they were about to sit the Britishers open fired at them. But the British records stated that it was from the side of 'Crowd' who first provoked the force and When Head Constable Moiteen and Assistant Superintend Johnson attempted to calm the violent "Crowd," they heard nothing and killed the two. Madhavan Nair said 'no matter how many people gathered, no one else would have paid any attention to what any Mappilas or police man said or did. However, all those who have presented had to suffer the

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consequences'. He came to the conclusion that the entire Tirurangadi mosque attack issue was caused by anxiety and dread of 'Crowd'[25].

Dr. K Gopalankutty also given an idea about the nature of 'Crowd' that participated in the incident. He said the 'Crowd' that gathered from Tirur, Vengara, Vazhakkulam, and Parappanangadi, were unarmed; only Thanur Mappilas had a stick, and even that was insufficient for facing the British. Additionally, he inquired as to how long it would take a 'Crowd' to turn revolutionary, and the answer was 'it won't take much'[26].

During Thanur's 'Crowd' mobilization in August of 1921, there was also a deliberate attempt to make the 'Crowd' violent from the side of British officials. The judges of the special tribunal stated in their verdict that sentenced Kunjikhader a Khilafat leader from Malabar like this. 'It is true that the rioters did not have guns, but they had long knives, swords and maces in their hands, it proves that they had come with the determination of destroy the District Magistrate and the army'[27].

Amu Sahib's during his trial in court also argued that, 'a group from the west came forward and began to cut and beat the soldiers. They had long knives and sticks in their hands. Although they were ordered to charge. They again entered the ranks of the soldiers and began to beat them severely, then force opened fire in self-defence'[28].

Constable Achuthan Nair's oral statement on the Tirurangadi mosque attack was also in favour of British authority. He also depicts the cruel face of 'Crowd', he stated that, the 'Crowd' was not willing to disperse and with their sword and knives they murdered some of the police men and never return the dead body of a police man named Govindan Nair[29].

K. Madhavan Nair and K.M. Haji, (eyewitnesses) to the Tirurangadi tragedy, provided us with a logical picture of the 'Crowd'. They were each given an explanation of how they used conversation to defuse a hostile 'Crowd'. They were able to disperse a sizable Pookkottur "Crowd" with the assistance of M.P. Narayana Menon, and the so-called revolutionary "Crowd" was prepared to comply. Here, it was clear that the same "Crowd" that stood for hostility was prepared to follow the leaders' instructions[30].

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Ali Musaliar's one of the main followers Lavakkutty explained about the incident like this, 'Kunjalavi and I were not at the mosque at that time, seeing the soldiers arresting two or three people and surrounding the mosque, a large number of people had gathered in the market. After a while I heard the 'thakbir' being recited from the street, and also heard that some of the Mappilas were arrested. Then Ali Musaliar and Kunjalavi were arrived. People said about the shooting of the Tanur people and Musaliar decided to enquire about the arrest and insisted to go with two or three members but gradually the number was increased and became a large 'Crowd' by adding with another 'Crowd'. then the three men sent earlier made a conversation with the soldiers and they seemed to be making a gesture with their hands as if asking him to sat down. Some were about to sat down the soldiers open fierd'[31]. Lavakutty also stated that the sudden attack from the British was may due to the anxiety and fear towards 'Crowd' in such a huge manner[32].

After analysing different perspectives on 'Crowd' actions that may be classified as colonial and indigenous versions, it is clear that, a conscious effort of Britishers to make the composition of 'Crowd' as a criminal entity. Understanding the composition, intentions, and characteristics of the 'Crowd' at each event is crucial to comprehending what actually transpired in history.

End Notes

1. Dr.K.Gopalankutty, *Malabar Padanangal*, Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram,2007, p. 2.
2. *Ibid.,* p. 186.
3. *Ibid.,*
4. *Ibid.,*
5. *Ibid.,* p.189.
6. *Ibid.,*
7. *Ibid.,*
8. *Ibid.,*
9. *Ibid.,* p.188.
10. Purathur Sreedharan, *Malabar Kalapavum Khilafat Prasthanavum*, H &C Publishing House, 2019, p. 44.
11. *Ibid.,*
12. K.Madhavan Nair, *Malabar Kalapam*, Mathrubhumi Books, Kozhikode, 1971, p. 103.
13. For More Reference see George Rude's *The Crowd in French Revolution*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1959.
14. *Op.cit.,* Purathur Sreedharan, p. 64.
15. Important Mosque in Tirur located in the centre of market.

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16. R.H. Hitchcock, *Peasant Revolt in Malabar a History of the Malabar Rebellion 1921*, Usha Publications, New Delhi, 1925, p. 12.
17. *Ibid.,*
18. Gopalankutty in his *Malabar Padanangal*, illustrated the importance of rumours in 1921 Malabar rebellion.
19. *Op.cit.,* R.H Hitchcock, p. 13.
20. *Ibid.,* p-p 13-15.
21. *Ibid.,*
22. *Op.cit.,* p.67.
23. Diwan Bahadur.C. Gopalan Nair, *The Moplah Rebellion 1921,* Norman Printing Bureau, Calicut, 1923.
24. F.B Evans, 'Note on the Rebellion', in Tottenham *Mappila Rebellion*, superintendent Govt. Press, Madrass, 1922, p. 42.
25. *op.cit.,* K.Madhavan Nair, p. 114.
26. K.Gopalankutty op.cit.,
27. Op.cit., K.Madhavan Nair, p. 116.
28. *Ibid.,*
29. *Ibid.,* 119.
30. M.P.S Menon, *Malabar Samaram, M.P Narayana Menonum Sahapravarthakarum,* Islamic Publishing House, Kozhikode, 1992, p.p 97-98.
31. *Op.cit.,* K.Madhavan Nair, p.p 121-122.
32. *Ibid.,*

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