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Author(s) HATHIKA K.

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Voices Silenced, Voices Surviving: The Mappilas and the Administrative Legacy of H. V. Conolly

HATHIKA K.
Assistant Professor
Department of History
Govt. Arts & Science College, Calicut
hathikaameen@gmail.com

In the history of Mappilas and their two centuries resistance against the British colonial rule, one name resonates with particular infamy, H. V Conolly (Henry Valentine Conolly), the district collector of Malabar from 1840 until his assassination in 1855. To the Mappilas, he embodied relentless surveillance and ceaseless pursuit, meticulously cataloguing their every activity in the broader tapestry of anti-colonial resistance. Even today, his name remains indelibly engraved in the historiography of Mappila resistance. This paper seeks to examine the mechanisms by which the British deftly silenced subaltern voices in Malabar, while simultaneously enshrining their perspectives through official records. At the centre of this enterprise stood Conolly, whose administrative reports and polemical accounts codified a narrative that marginalized indigenous resistances, shaping perceptions of Mappilas long beyond the cessation of the British authority in the region. Through this lens the enduring legacy of colonial historiography emerges not merely as a record of governance, but as a carefully curated memory that privileged the voice of the conqueror over that of the subaltern.

The administrative period of Conolly in Malabar may be identified as a time marked by several significant revolts, such as Cherur Revolt (1843), the Manjeri Revolt (1849), and the Kulathur Revolt (1851). Although each uprisings had its own immediate causes, they shared a common underlying factor; the prolonged social and economic distress experienced by the Mappilas as a result of British colonial policies. Despite these deeper structural issues, colonial records consistently portrayed these revolts as religious disturbances, framing them as expressions of "fanaticism."[1] It was Conolly who first popularized this terminology in Malabar, and it subsequently became standard usage among British officials when referring to the Mappilas.

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The Mappila revolt of 1849 at Manjeri was a crucial one occurred in the time of Conolly. This revolt was led by Athen Kurikkal, who was motivated not by personal animosity towards Manjeri Karanoolpad, the local landlord, but rather by a deep-seated sense of economic and social alienation. Kurikkal's grievances were made clear in a document he left behind before his untimely demise at the hands of the British H.M. 94th regiment. According to W. Robinson, the head Assistant Magistrate of Malabar during 1849, Kurikkal's document detailed the injustices perpetrated by Karanoolpad. The landlord had forced his tenants to pay exorbitant fees for renewing their leases, ostensibly for the repair and beautification of Manjeri pagoda. In reality, however, these fees were simply a means of extracting more money from the already impoverished tenant farmers.[2]

The economic grievances of Mappilas from the landlords could also be seen in the revolt of Kulathur in 1851. Their violent protest against the landlords, even went so far as to destroy all of their land related documents. However, despite the clear evidence of social and economic injustice that led to such uprisings, Connolly, dismissed the Mappila's struggles as mere manifestation of fanatical frenzy, driven by a thirst for death and vengeance against their enemies.[3] Connolly went to claim that "the person who gave vent to this dangerous doctrine, was the eldest son of a priest at Tirurangadi in the Shernad taluk, and near connection of the *Thangal* or priest of that place; whose name has so continually figured in all the histories of the fanatical outbreaks of the last eighteen years."[4] To quell such revolts, he suggested that the government remove *Thangal* from Malabar, implying that the Mappilas' economic grievances were merely an extension of their religious fervor.[5] Furthermore, Conolly accused the Mappilas of being the allies of Tipu Sultan, and portrayed them as the natural foes of the East India Company. In doing so, he ignored the deep-seated economic and social issues that lay at the heart of the Mappilas' discontent, preferring instead to focus on their supposed religious fanaticism.[6]

Connolly was an individual of great inquisitiveness and anxiety, particularly when it came to the emergent and fast spreading discontent among the Mappila population towards the British rule. It was not lost on him that since the year of 1836, the political situation of the district had taken a turn towards chaos, with numerous uprisings of

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Mappilas against both their landlords and colonial state. His correspondence with his superiors in Madras was replete with suggestions on how to introduce more stringent measures to curb these revolts. He advocated disarming of the people, escheating the property of insurgent Mappilas, and imposing fine on the areas where the revolts had taken place.[7] Despite all these, the frequent Mappila revolts continued to strike fear into the British authorities. As a result, the government decided to appoint T.L. Strange as a commission, tasked with the duty of investigating the root cause of the recurrent Mappila revolts in Malabar.

On 25th September 1852, T.L. Strange submitted a report to the government which contained an analysis of the Mappila revolts that had occurred between the year 1836 and 1852. Strange observed that the majority of these uprisings had taken place exclusively in the three taluks of Ernad, Shernad, and Walluvanad, which situated in the southern region of Malabar.[8] After conducting a detailed examination of the events that had unfolded, he arrived at the conclusion that all of these revolts had originated from the *Halilakkam*, which is a state of fanatical frenzy that had overtaken the Mappilas. He further found that these individuals had been incited to organize these revolts by the Muslim priests, who held a tremendous influence over the populace. According to Strange, the chief instigator and supporter of these was Tarammal Tangal (Sayyid Fazal, son of Sayyid Alawi), who had provided his blessing and encouragement to the rebels who visit him frequently. In Strange's view, these individuals had been given the sanction to carry out their 'fanatical' acts by this influential figure.[9]

The real incentive to the Mappila discontents, according to Strange, was their religious bigotry. To substantiate his arguments, he differentiates the Mappilas of the interior and those of the coast, the former he designated as an excitable and turbulent group, characterized by ignorance and recklessness, who harbor a dangerous brand of fanaticism.[10] In contrast, the coastal Mappilas engage in various occupations that foster interaction between individuals and bring prosperity. This, in turn, has a civilizing effect on the people, making them more humane and less prone to violence. Unfortunately, the interior areas are plagued by religious intolerance and treacherous behavior with no proper employment opportunities to speak of. On the other hand, he

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held the Mappilas as a united and advancing body who were keen and by no means scrupulous in the pursuit of wealth and keep a tenacious hold on all that they may acquire. Thus, he argues, “the land is with the Hindus, and the money is with the Mappilas.”[11]

One of the most convincing proposals put forth by Strange, which was believed to yield excellent results for the British, was imposing fines on the rioting Mappila community and utilizing the proceeds to compensate those who suffered injury or damage during the outbreaks.[12] Strange argued that implementing this proposal would be a more effective means of curtailing the Mappilas' inclination to riot. He supported his argument by saying that the Mappilas are careful with their money. If they are heavily punished, they will avoid actions that lead to penalties. The law targets the wealthy and influential members of the community, especially in areas where outbreaks might happen. The Mappilas are a united group and tend to follow the leaders who have a strong influence over them.[13]

Another significant measure Strange recommended to the government was strict regulations on possession of arms. He asserts that the proliferation of weapons in the country, particularly among the Mappila community, poses a grave threat to peace and stability of the nation. Strange opines that in a civilized society, there is no legitimate reason for the citizenry to be armed, and that possession of weapons can greatly influence one's character.[14] Consequently, he contends that the disarmament of the Mappila people is imperative for the safeguarding of the state and the preservation of a peaceful way of life.

The crux of Strange's proposal was to proscribe the carrying of the *Pishan Cutty*, a domestic knife commonly used by the Mappilas for cutting coconuts, betel and sticks. Dubbed as the 'Moplah-Knife', he portrays this tool with a detailed depiction, branding it as, " a very telling weapon, having no object, but that of taking life."[15] He appeals to the government to disarm the Mappilas in his district, whom he considers as “proven treacherous” having united against the British during their early days in Malabar with an abhorrent reputation of sin and betrayal.[16] This bigotry pervades throughout his report, and casts doubt on the Mappilas' trustworthiness for government service. He recommends the replacement of fifty-nine Mappila peons with Hindus in five taluks.

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However, Strange's superiors have contested and opposed his stance on Mappila servants.[17]

The report presented by Strange, unfortunately, did not provide any insightful and practical recommendations for the government to resolve the ongoing conflicts between landlords and tenants. It is notable that he claimed that "no instance can any outbreak or threat of outbreak be attributed to the oppression of tenants by landlords."[18] However, Strange's proposals for suppressing the Mappila revolts were ultimately implemented, and in 1854, the 'Moplah War-knife Act' was introduced, by which possession of arms in the hands of Mappilas was made punishable, and no Mappila men were allowed to keep offensive or defensive weapons without permission from the government. The provisions of this act were translated into Malayalam, and its copies were distributed to the police heads and village officials of Malabar.[19]

It is striking that Conolly was the person who showed greatest interest and was determined to implement the recommendations put forward by Strange in Malabar against the Mappilas. He conducted an extensive operation throughout the district with the explicit aim of apprehending those in possession of the infamous 'Moplah Knife', and cautioning the blacksmiths against making and supplying such weapons.[20] He was an ardent proponent of the proposals put forth by Strange, and harbored a deep-seated prejudice towards the Mappilas. In one of his letters to his superiors in Madras, he unabashedly referred to the Mappilas as "they are not a people, who will respect the law, and it not too polite to treat them in the same way as the other subjects of the government are treated."[21] Drawing an analogy between the Mappilas and the notorious Thugs of central India, whose unwavering solidarity thwarted all attempts to ascertain their culpability, he emphasized the need for stern measures to be taken against them.[22]

The period of Connolly earned tremendous infamy among the Mappila community, owing to the stringent measures that he enforced against them, including the 'Moplah War-knife Act.' Additionally, he deported Sayyid Fadl, whom he deemed to be the prime instigator of Mappila revolts, to Arabia on 27th March 1852, along with his family. This action, coupled with other existing grievances against government policies,

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propelled the Mappilas towards a path of sustained violence. The culmination of this resentment came to a head on 14th September 1855, when a group of Mappilas assassinated Connolly. The British troops wasted no time in tracking down and eliminating the accused. The remaining suspects were apprehended and sent to central jails in Bellary, Gudappah, Kurnool, Rajamundry, Vishagapattanam, Guntur and Nellore. One such suspect was Mambarath Beevi, who was the custodian of the Mamburam shrine, the final resting place of Sayyid Alawi. The British authorities believed that the Mappilas had convened at the Mamburam shrine to plan the assassination of Conolly. Mambarath Beevi was arrested in connection with this incident and subsequently sent to the central jail in Nellore, along with her infant child.[23]

On November 24, 1855, an article in *The Press* from London commended on Conolly's murder, suggesting that such an outbreak had never happened before he went to Malabar. It implied that his administration must have been problematic to cause such a reaction. The article also stated that a wise government would have investigated his actions more thoroughly than the Madras government did.[24]

Conolly's perception of the Mappila population emerge with unmistakable clarity; long before his colleague Strange submitted his report and recommendations, Conolly had already fashioned a deeply negative image of the community. He laboured relentlessly to impose measures designed to restrict, monitor, and ultimately efface the presence and mobility of the Mappilas in Malabar. Yet, to enforce these policies, he required formal sanction from his superiors in the Madras government. In this context, Strange's report became an instrument through which Conolly sought to legitimize and implement his most severe strategies.

By inscribing the Mappilas within a single, powerful label, as one that cast every form of resistance as the product of "extreme fanaticism." Through that Conolly effectively silenced their voices and shaped how British officers, for decades after his death, continued to interpret Mappila resistance. For the colonial administration, Conolly's tenure may have appeared as a legacy of diligent governance, a period marked by firm control over Malabar. But for the Mappilas, his administration remained synonymous with oppression and unrelenting hardship, and his memory endured as

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that of a figure whose policies inflicted profound and lasting suffering upon their community.

Endnotes

1. The negative connotations used by British officials to describe the Mappilas are evident throughout virtually every colonial document. This paper relies primarily on the source titled *Correspondence on Moplah Outrageous*, particularly Volume One, where we can clearly observe how Conolly and his fellow officers consistently employed terms such as "fanaticism" to characterize Mappila resistance. Over time, this terminology shaped the colonial narrative and reinforced a biased interpretation of Mappila socio-political struggles.
2. W. Robinson, Head Assistant Magistrate, to H.V. Connolly, Magistrate of Malabar, letter dated October 18, 1849, Calicut, No. 169, *Correspondence on Moplah Outrageous* (C.M.O), vol. 1 (Madras: United Scottish Press, 1863), 85.
3. H.V. Connolly, Magistrate of Malabar, to T. Pycroft, Secretary to Government, Judicial Department, Fort Saint George, letter dated January 23, 1851, Calicut, *C.M.O,* 192.
4. H.V. Connolly, Magistrate of Malabar, to H.C. Montgomery, Secretary to Government, Judicial Department, Fort Saint George, letter dated October 12, 1849, Calicut, No. 27, *C.M O,* 33.
5. H.V Conolly letter to H. C Montgomery, 35.
6. H.V Connolly letter to H.C Montgomery, 50.
7. H.V Connolly letter to H.C Montgomery, 37.
8. T.L. Strange, Special Commissioner of Malabar, to T. Pycroft, Secretary to Government, Judicial Department, Fort Saint George, letter dated September 25, 1852, Special Commissioner's Office, Tellicherry, *C.M, O*, 413.
9. T.L Strange letter to T. Pycroft, 413-421.
10. T.L Strange letter to T. Pycroft, 443.
11. T.L Strange letter to T. Pycroft, 454.
12. T.L Strange letter to T. Pycroft, 463.
13. T.L Strange letter to T. Pycroft, 163.
14. T.L Strange letter to T. Pycroft, 464.
15. T.L Strange letter to T. Pycroft, 466.
16. T.L Strange letter to T. Pycroft, 469.
17. Henry Pottinger, *Minutes on the Report of T.L. Strange*, dated January 1853, *C.M. O*, 489.
18. T.L. Strange letter to T. Pycroft, 413.
19. H.V. Connolly, Magistrate of Malabar, to T. Pycroft, Secretary to Government, Judicial Department, Fort Saint George, letter dated August 4, 1854, *C.M.O,* 415.
20. H.V Conolly letter to T. Pycroft, 416.
21. H.V. Connolly letter to T. Pycroft, 218.
22. H.C. Montgomery, Secretary to Government, Fort Saint George, *Minutes*, March 31, 1856, *C.M.O.*, vol. 2, 480.
23. H.C. Montgomery letter to Fort Saint George, 480.
24. *The Press* (London, England), Saturday, November 24, 1855,1-2, accessed February 15, 2022,
25. https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/

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