

# **Contestation and Conflict: Colonial Malabar in Transition**

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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN  
HISTORY**

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## DECLARATION

**I, Irfan Habeeb R T (Registration No. 15SHPH01)**, hereby declare that this thesis entitled “**Contestation and Conflict: Colonial Malabar in Transition**” submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of **Dr V. Rajagopal**, Department of History, University of Hyderabad is a bonafide research work. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/ INFLIBNET.

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Further, the student has the following publication (s) before submission of the thesis for adjudication and has produced evidence for the same in the form of acceptance letter or the print in the relevant area of his research:

1. R. T., Irfan Habeeb. ‘Indigenous Elites and Social Legislations in Colonial Malabar (1792-1933)’. *Innovation and Integrative Research Centre Journal*, 3, no. 10 (2025):1-10.

and

has made presentations in the following conferences:

1. “Silence and Resistance: The Emergence of the Subaltern Political Subjects in Colonial India,” Summer School TACET AD LIBITUM! Towards a Poetics and

politics of silence. Organised by the Graduate School Practices of Literature of the University of Munster on 24-29 July 2022.

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Further, the student was exempted from doing coursework during Ph.D. (recommended by the Doctoral Committee) on the basis of the following courses passed during his M.Phil Program and the M.Phil Degree was awarded:

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## SDG Information

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**Among 17 goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>), under which SDG the work incorporated in the thesis will be addressed:**

The thesis will be addressed under the SDG goal of “No poverty, Reduced inequalities, and Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions”.

**How the work incorporated in the thesis addressed the above SDG (in 250 words):**

The thesis “Contestation and Conflict: Colonial Malabar in Transition” addresses the selected Sustainable Development Goals by critically examining how historical processes of conflict, negotiation, and resistance shaped the foundations of justice, equality, and socio-economic well-being in the region. In relation to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), the work analyses the functioning of colonial administrative and legal structures. It demonstrates how state responses to caste conflicts, communal tensions, peasant uprisings, and workers’ movements determined the nature of contestation and conflict. Through case studies such as the Kalpathy incidents, mosque-related disputes, peasant confrontations, and workers’ strikes, the thesis highlights how both communities and emerging political organisations engaged with the colonial state to demand rights, recognition, and fair governance.

The work contributes to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by documenting how marginalised groups, Thiyyas, Ezhavas, Dalits, Mappila tenants, and the industrial working class contested entrenched social hierarchies and discriminatory practices. It illustrates how colonial transformations created new opportunities and tensions that allowed oppressed groups to assert their rights, challenge spatial and social restrictions, and seek upward mobility. These historical struggles reveal long-term dynamics that shaped pathways towards social equality.

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Irfan Habeeb R T

December 16, 2025,  
University of Hyderabad.

## Glossary

<i>Agraharam</i>	: Exclusive and segregated residential quarter of Tamil Brahmins
<i>Amsom</i>	: An administrative subdivisions with cluster of <i>desams</i> .
<i>Cherumar</i>	: Untouchable agricultural tenant community
<i>Chetti</i>	: Group of traders from Tamil districts
<i>Desam</i>	: Local level revenue sub division
<i>Firka</i>	: Revenue subdivision with in a taluk consisting cluster of villages
<i>Illom</i>	: Nambutiri household
<i>Janmam</i>	: Hereditary proprietorship
<i>Janmi</i>	: Landlord
<i>Janmitham</i>	: Landlordism
<i>Jatha</i>	: Political procession often with slogans
<i>Kalasam</i>	: A Hindu religious procession with the holly water
<i>Kanam</i>	: Land lease/mortgage
<i>Karyasthar</i>	: Managers of a landowning family
<i>Kudiyar</i>	: Tenant
<i>Kuzhikanam</i>	: A type of lease/mortgage meant for expansion of cultivation
<i>Lathi</i>	: A heavy wooden or bamboo baton used by police forces
<i>Madrasa</i>	: Muslim school for religious education
<i>Maqam</i>	: Tomb or shrine of a revered saint, martyr or Muslim religious leader.
<i>Marumakkathayam</i>	: Matrilineal system in Kerala
<i>Maryada</i>	: Customary norms and understandings

<i>Mulla</i>	: Muslim priest
<i>Naduvazhis</i>	: Local chieftains
<i>Nambutiri</i>	: Brahmans in Kerala
<i>Nayi</i>	: Dog
<i>Nercha</i>	: Festival held at the <i>maqams</i>
<i>Niskarapalli</i>	: A small mosque where individual or small groups held daily prayer.
<i>Otti</i>	: A type of land lease.
<i>Paradesi</i>	: Foreigner
<i>Sambandham</i>	: A custom conjugal union between Nayar women and Nambutiri men
<i>Sampradayam</i>	: Tradition or spiritual lineage
<i>Srambi</i>	: A small mosque for the daily prayer
<i>Taravads</i>	: Household
<i>Verumpattam</i>	: Simple lease

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## Introduction

This thesis, titled “**Contestation and Conflict: Colonial Malabar in Transition,**” is an attempt to understand the dynamics of collective actions in various instances of contestation and conflict during the colonial period. European colonialism, through its political, economic, social and ideological interventions, restructured the pre-modern hierarchical structure of the Indian society. Pre-modern hierarchies were set in place, and any contestations or conflicts were not particularly productive in that era in redefining the nature of authority and power between communities. When British colonialism appeared, colonial stance to align with social groups to maintain their authority and to maximise their interest operated on a condition of ‘neutrality’ towards various native groups. This attitude of the colonial state created a new political sphere as distinct from the pre-modern period, where by contests and conflicts could redefine the authority between social groups.<sup>1</sup> Hence, under the political landscape of colonialism, contestation and conflicts emerged as ‘essential’ or ‘beneficial’ strategies in redefining the structure of authority. Ranabir Samaddar argued that the novel, and sometimes anti-colonial political subjects, emerged through the daily and ordinary contentious situations.<sup>2</sup>

Colonialism was not only about empire-building, but was also about the discursive realms by which it established hegemony. Scholars have argued that the Western perception of the colonised as inferior civilisations, -‘barbaric, irrational and inherently violent’- had justified the extensive use of violence on colonial subjects.

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1 See, Dipankar Gupta, ‘Communalism and Nationalism in Colonial India’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 8/9 (1993): 339–41.

2 Ranabir Samaddar, *Emergence of the Political Subject* (New Delhi, 2010).

Hence, in colonialism, violence unleashed upon its subjects purportedly had a civilising and productive function.<sup>3</sup> Colonial discourse established violence as a legitimate functional device. Many scholars have discussed the effects of colonialism on the colonised.<sup>4</sup> Colonial subjects who were influenced by the colonial discourse deployed “the use of violence as a resource in world making.”<sup>5</sup> Colonial subjects apprehended contestations and conflicts as a means to establish their new found authority and appropriated violence as an inherent means of contestations. Scholars suggested a massive increase in interpersonal violence during the colonial rule.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that the subjects in the colonies were not only the victims of colonial violence. They appropriated that violence and actively inflicted it on one another.

In other words, the possibility of restructuring the social hierarchy opened up an arena for contestation and conflict, and the use of violence was perceived as a legitimate means of contestation by the native social groups. Historians of colonialism have often emphasised that collective violence was a constant feature in the political landscape of colonialism.<sup>7</sup> Historical works on protest and resistance in colonial India unequivocally corroborate this point. For instance, the discussion on peasant insurgency by Ranajit Guha explored how physical and symbolic violence shaped the

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3 Deana Heath, *Colonial Terror: Torture and State Violence in Colonial India* (Oxford, 2021), 44–45.

4 For instance, see, Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, Oxford India Paperbacks (New Delhi, 1983); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives’, *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247–72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2505169>.

5 Heath, *Colonial Terror*, 48.

6 For instance see, David Arnold, ‘Dacoity and Rural Crime in Madras, 1860–1940’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 6, no. 2 (1979): 140–67.

7 Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918–1940* (Cambridge, 2012), 8.

relationships of power in colonial India.<sup>8</sup> In his discussions about the jute workers of Bengal, Chakrabarty shows that hierarchy and violence remained a dominant organising principle in the worker's everyday life.<sup>9</sup> A nuanced study by Kama Maclean explains political violence as a phenomenon that posed a challenge to mainstream political thinking.<sup>10</sup> What these studies suggest in common is the contestation and conflicts in which subaltern groups such as lower castes, peasants, and workers, were often involved or tended to prefer the use of violence as a strategy of political intervention.

In the light of these understandings, this thesis examines the changes in Malabar district, an administrative unit of colonial India in the Madras Presidency. It locates the confrontations and conflicts that occurred in a society undergoing transition due to colonial interventions. This study aims to understand the nature of contestations in which subaltern collectives with caste, religious, and class identities were involved in ushering in a novel form of Malabar Society.

### **1.1 Malabar Society in Pre-Modern Period**

Arthur James Platt, a British civil servant who was appointed as the magistrate of Malabar in 1934, wrote:

At the end of August I descended from the Olympus with some regret, which was speedily allayed by the earthly paradise of Malabar where I am at present stationed. It would be difficult to imagine any place more lovely and truly tropical than Malabar, save Ceylon which it rivals. Blue sea and sky, golden sands, silver palms, feathery bamboos, red

8 Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983).

9 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890-1940* (Delhi, 1989), xii.

10 Kama Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India: Violence, Image, Voice and Text* (Gurugram, 2016), 14.

roads, emerald paddy, green luxuriant vegetation everywhere, and behind it all the towering heights of the Western Ghats: I could write pages in this strain and all of it is Malabar.<sup>11</sup>

Malabar now is constituted by the northern districts of the present-day Kerala state, inclusive of Kasargode, Kannur, Calicut (Kozhikode), Wayanad, Malappuram, and Palakkad. During the British colonial period, Malabar was a district under the presidency of Madras. The geographical boundaries of British Malabar and colonial Malabar remain almost similar, except that most parts of the present-day Kasargode district were under another administrative unit called South Canara. In this thesis, the boundaries of Malabar are defined as they were in the British administrative unit.

Until the twelfth century, the geographical area that we now consider Malabar was under the rule of a monarchical state, headed by the Cheraman Perumal of Mahodayapuram. The kingdom of Perumal consisted of the thirteen *nadus*, which were the local units of the polity. These *nadus* were administered by local chiefs called *naduvazhis*.<sup>12</sup> By the first quarter of the twelfth century, the reign of Perumal came to an end, resulting in the independence of hitherto dependent chiefs. *Nadus* emerged as new political principalities. Veluthat rightly stated that “the history of political process and political forms in Kerala in the post-Chera period is the history of the rise of certain principalities into more powerful kingdoms and the reduction of certain others to less powerful chiefdoms or even to cypher with all the internal

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11 Arthur James Platt Papers 1929-1936, Mss Eur D 832, Indian Office Records, British Library, London.

12 M. G. S. Narayanan, ‘Consolidation of Agrarian Society- The Structure of Polity’, in *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium*, ed. P. J. Cherian (Thiruvananthapuram, 1999), 2:56–61.

mutations that such a situation offered.”<sup>13</sup> During this consolidation process, the chief of Eranad became one of the most powerful rulers, expanding his territory by conquering nearby southern chiefdoms up to Cochin, such as Valluvanad. The chief of Eranad, later known as Samutiri, or Zamorin, established his capital in Calicut.<sup>14</sup> In North Malabar, Kolathiri emerged as a powerful ruler.

*Naduvazhis* and *desavazhis* emerged under these kings to fulfil the administrative and military responsibilities. They were granted land as a form of service tenure, thus creating aristocratic Nayars, with “varying positions on the graded scale of autocracy.”<sup>15</sup> The rights over the land granted to local chiefs by the kings were called *janmam*, and those who held these rights were referred to as *janmis*. Logan argued that the *janmam* was not just the right to land, but also the authority over the territory and the people it encompassed.<sup>16</sup> They held judicial and administrative powers and possessed nearly all natural resources, including waste lands, forests, and water bodies. Along with rajas (rulers), Brahmins (priests), and aristocratic Nayars emerged as important holders of the *janmam* right during this period.

*Janmis* leased land to tenants for cultivation. This lease was given for twelve years, and the tenure was called *kanam*. *Kanakkar*, who holds this tenure, also served as militia in charge of law and order and functioned as the petty officials. They were

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13 Kesavan Veluthat, ‘Further Expansion of Agrarian Society: Political Forms’, in *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium*, ed. P. J. Cherian (Thiruvananthapuram, 1999), 2:65.

14 To see the expansion of Samutiri, see, Veluthat, ‘Further Expansion of Agrarian Society’, 68–70.

15 These aristocratic classes included Nayanars, Nambiyars, Moopil Nayars, Menons, Kurups, Panikkars, Menokkis, etc. Veluthat, ‘Further Expansion of Agrarian Society’, 73.

16 William Logan, *Malabar Manual* (Madras, 1887), 1:607.

also mostly drawn from the Nayar caste and had sub-caste connotations. They either directly engaged in cultivation or subleased the land. This led to sub-infeudation, and another land tenure, called *verumpattam*, emerged as simple lease for a year. They were the cultivating tenants and they were drawn from the non-aristocratic Nayars, Thiyyas and Mappilas.

Medieval historians argue the consolidation of agrarian society in Kerala by the sixteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Paddy was cultivated in the plains and river banks, whereas garden crops such as fruits trees, coconut, arecanut, and pepper were cultivated in the elevated areas. In Malabar, the expansion of food crop cultivation was limited due to the absence of large river valleys. However, limited expansion of paddy cultivation was recorded in Malabar during this period.<sup>18</sup> While the expansion of cultivation led to the consolidation of the powers of *naduvazhis* and *janmis* and led to contestation with kings in other parts of Kerala, in Malabar, surplus was limited due to the limitations of agrarian expansion, and consolidation of *janmis* or *naduvazhis* did not happen to the extent that they could contest the authority of the kings.<sup>19</sup>

The agrarian system and the structure of hierarchical surplus extraction defined social relations in pre-colonial Malabar. Village settlements were formed around a land-owning household. Different *jatis* were incorporated into this agrarian system, and each *jati* played a distinct occupational role within this society. The

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17 K. N. Ganesh, 'Agrarian Society in Kerala (1500-1800)', in *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium*, ed. P. J. Cherian (Thiruvananthapuram, 1999), 2:123.

18 There was the expansion of new naduvazhis into new regions and the establishment of Swaroopams. Establishment of Sasta temple at Aryankavu, Punjar Swaroopam, Kattil Kovilakam, Nileswaram Kovilakam, Nilambur Kovilakam were examples. For elaborated discussions see, Ganesh, 'Agrarian Society in Kerala (1500-1800)', 126–27.

19 For elaboration, see, K.N. Ganesh, 'Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala: Janmam—Kanam Relations during the 16th-18th Centuries', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 28, no. 3 (1991): 320–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001946469102800304>.

brahminical ideology and ritual practices instated caste hierarchy. For instance, the *Keralolpathy* legitimised the ascendancy of local chiefs and local rulers by describing that the Perumal reign ended when the last Perumal embraced Islam and went to pilgrimage to Mecca, dividing his kingdom among the local chiefs. Authority of medieval rulers was derived from this narration of donation by Perumal, “symbolising the sanction behind the throne.”<sup>20</sup> Brahminical traditions not only incorporated the agrarian sections but also the non-agrarian sections through their ritualistic position in the caste hierarchy. Brahmins and the local rulers occupied the top strata in this hierarchy. Nayars constituted the successive strata that occupied the duties of temple servants, militia, and *kanam* tenants. Thiyyas/Ezhavas and numerous artisanal castes constituted the next strata. Dalit castes, such as Cherumar and Pulayar, were employed as agricultural labourers. Tribal castes, such as Paniyas, were lived in the peripheries.

There were other communities outside this native caste organisation in Malabar, such as Muslims. Malabar came into contact with Islam through maritime trade relations with the Arabian Peninsula during the seventh century. Through matrimonial alliances and conversions, the native Muslim community known as Mappilas emerged in Malabar. Before the sixteenth century, the Mappila population was primarily located in the coastal region and engaged in trade and commerce.

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, a few important changes occurred in Malabar society. First, the agrarian economy got consolidated, and a “hierarchical order based on customary ties of dependence, caste system and economic and ritual exploitation of the subjected peasantry had come into

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20 Veluthat, ‘Further Expansion of Agrarian Society’, 65.

existence.”<sup>21</sup> Second, Portuguese expansion disrupted trade and weakened the economic position of the Zamorin and also pushed the Mappila Muslims to rural areas. Most of the Mappilas became *verumpattam* tenants, and a few held *kanam* tenure. There were also conversions from the dalit castes, and these converted Muslims became agricultural labourers. Third, transactions involving tenurial rights, including *janmam*, were conducted through the medium of cash.<sup>22</sup> Since sixteenth century, cash transactions had become prevalent in Malabar developing in tandem with external trade relations. The mortgage/rent for land tenures was paid in cash. At least since the seventeenth century, profits generated from trade and cash crops were invested in land, and wealthy individuals from diverse communities, including Thiyyas and Mappilas, held land as *kanam* tenure. Some of them also held *janmam* rights.<sup>23</sup>

## **1.2 Mysorean Intervention (1766-1792)**

The political conditions in Malabar were very favourable to external invasion when Hyder Ali invaded Malabar in 1766. In northern Malabar, Kolathunadu was fragmented into numerous independent principalities. In southern Malabar, Zamorin’s power was severely weakened due to confrontations with the Portuguese, which led to a permanent state of war since the sixteenth century and disrupted external trade. Mysore rulers integrated numerous fragmented minor principalities to form a single administrative unit, which later became the Malabar District under the British rule.

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21 Ganesh, ‘Agrarian Society in Kerala (1500-1800)’, 176.

22 Malayil, looking at the Kudali Grandhavari, argued that 47 out of 178 land transactions between 1602 and 1786 mention the outright sale of absolute rights in the land. See, Abhilash Malayil, ‘Commercialisation and Landed Proprietorship on the Malabar Coast in the Eighteenth Century’, *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 60, no. 1 (2023): 13–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00194646221148707>.

23 Malayil, ‘Commercialisation and Landed Proprietorship’, 25.

The improved transport networks under the Mysore rulers further strengthened this political integration. Until the Mysorean invasion, transportation was primarily dependent on rivers and backwaters. Mysorean rulers constructed roads which connected almost all parts of Malabar.<sup>24</sup>

Mysorean rule brought radical changes in the socio-economic conditions of Malabar.<sup>25</sup> One of the major interventions by the Mysore rulers was in land relations. There was no land revenue collected by the rulers in Malabar before the Mysoreans.<sup>26</sup> Income for the kingdom came from land under their direct possession. *Janmis* extracted surplus as rent. Mysorean Governor Arshad Begh Khan surveyed the entire land in Malabar during 1784-85 and fixed the land tax based on the actual produce. The produce was calculated based on the seed sown. If the produce was ten *parah*<sup>27</sup> for every one *parah* of the seed sown, 55 per cent was given to the cultivator, and the remaining 45 percent was shared by the government and the landlord, by shares of 30 percent and 15 percent, respectively.<sup>28</sup> In traditional land relation produce after the cost of seeds was divided equally among the cultivator, tenant and *janmi*, each taking one-third. Mysorean settlement eliminated *janmi* and collected a significant portion of the produce, leaving the tenant in a vulnerable position. There were many anomalies in this settlement, where in the produce was overestimated in some places and underestimated in others.

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24 C. A. Innes, *Madras District Gazetteers, Malabar*, ed. F. B. Evans (Madras, 1933), 1:268.

25 Manmathan M.R., 'In Defence of Tradition: Elite Resistance to Mysorean Rule in Malabar', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 69 (2008): 486.

26 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:602.

27 *Parah* is a traditional paddy measuring unit used in Kerala.

28 Innes, *Madras District Gazetteers, Malabar*, 1:324.

Mysorean settlements were made with the cultivator, thereby terminating the *janmis'* rights to any share of the produce. Mysore rulers considered *kanakkar* as the actual cultivator. Nambutiri *janmis* and rulers lost their traditional rights to the land. They had to move out of Malabar due to the political hostility of the Mysore rulers. The *naduvazhis* and *desavazhis*, who were the militia and the administrators of the traditional kingdom, had to seek refuge either in the nearby princely states or the forts of the English East India Company. Then the intermediary tenants emerged as new aristocrats. Once the pre-Mysore kingdom disappeared, the Nayar militia also lost their income serving the army of those rulers. There were constant confrontations between the Nayars and the Mysore regime, and Mysore rulers initiated legal and social measures to curtail the authority of the Nayars. The position of Mysore rulers against polyandry and the half-naked dressing style of Nayars, also provoked the Nayars, and proclamations against such practices resulted in further subversion of the Nayar authority. The Mysorean invasion of Malabar disrupted land relations, caste system, and the traditional network of authority. This created a context in which the elites of Malabar aligned with the British.

### **1.3 British Land Revenue Policies and Contestations**

The British began consolidating their power in Malabar at the start of the seventeenth century, with the intention of maintaining trade monopoly for English East India Company.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, other European powers, the Dutch and the French, were

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29 In 1615, Captain Keeling signed a treaty with Zamorin by which they opened up collection centres in Ponnani and Calicut. In 1644, Zamorin permitted the establishment of a British factory in Calicut. Between 1684 and 1695, the British underwent a southward expansion, establishing a fort at Anjuthengu in the Kingdom of Venad. By 1708, they also established a fort at Thalassery in north Malabar. By the 1720s, the East India Company had firmly established links with the Kingdom of Travancore. See, P. K. Michael Tharakan, 'Factors in the Penetration and Consolidation of Colonial Power in Kerala (1721-1819)', in *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium*, ed. P. J. Cherian (Thiruvananthapuram, 1999), 2:352.

also competing to establish their dominance over the region and control trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The British allied with Travancore and Zamorin in Malabar, which helped them to consolidate their power in the area. It was during this same period that the Mysorean rulers also attempted to expand their territory, which often resulted in conflict with British interests. Mysorean expansion threatened the native rulers of Malabar and Travancore. The British, Zamorin, and the King of Travancore joined forces against the Mysoreans in 1792. The entire Malabar region, except for Wayanad, came under direct British control in 1792 through the Treaty of Srirangapatnam. When Tipu was killed in the 1799 war, the remaining areas also came under British control.

When Lord Cornwallis, the Governor-General of India, requested the native rulers from Malabar and Travancore to join the fight against Tipu, he had assured them of the reinstatement of the authority of Brahmins and other *janmis* over the land. The first attempt by the British was to reinstate the *janmis* and extract maximum revenue to meet the war's expenses. The reinstatement of landed aristocracy was also a colonial priority, as they wanted to develop a native group upon whom they could depend. As the superior sections within the native society, the British considered the traditional aristocracy to be the most suitable social group to serve the empire.

In the initial years, the Company collected revenue through the local rulers. The calculation of revenue was based on the Mysorean settlement, and the estimated revenue was billed to the local rulers. There was no fixation of the revenue burden on the cultivator; instead, the revenue to be given to the Company was fixed. The local rulers failed in meeting the revenue estimation, and by 1800, the Company began direct revenue collection.

Since the beginning, there were detailed discussions and debates about the most suitable land revenue settlement for Madras. Wellesley had announced that the Bengal system of revenue would be implemented in Madras. There were several objections to this proposal. The critics argued that a proper *zamindari* class, as it existed in Bengal, was absent in Madras.<sup>30</sup> Thomas Munro, since 1800, vehemently argued for a settlement where the government should collect revenue from the actual cultivator of the land. Hence, by 1805, the *ryotwari* settlement had emerged as the most common form of settlement in Madras.<sup>31</sup>

In Malabar, since 1801, the attempt was to implement the *ryotwari* settlement. Major Macleod, who took charge as the first principal collector of Malabar, was a supporter of Munro and implemented the *ryotwari* land settlement. The implementation of the *ryotwari* settlement in Malabar created tensions and contestations. Establishing ownership over land became one of the primary concern during this period. Numerous suits emerged in the judicial courts of Malabar contesting and claiming the ownership of land. In 1815 alone, 5,754 suits were filed.<sup>32</sup> The revenue demand was not realised anywhere until the twentieth century. For almost a century, British administration was unable to revise or increase the initial revenue estimation, which was not ideal for *ryotwari* settlements. Malayil argued that these conditions manifest the ‘*ryotwari* predicament’ and the murder of the Malabar

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30 Burton Stein, *Thomas Munro: The Origins of the Colonial State and His Vision of Empire* (Delhi, 1989), 121.

31 To see detailed discussions on these debates among the British administrators, see, Stein, *Thomas Munro*, 121–35.

32 Statement in the House of Commons, 1833, Abhilash Malayil, *Ryotwari: Company Statum Political Economiyum Malabar Jillaye Aspadamakkiyulla Nireekshanangal* (Calicut, 2022), 58.

collector, H. V. Conolly, in 1855, was the culmination of the crisis within the *ryotwari* system.<sup>33</sup>

As a result of the complex environment of land ownership and tenurial relations, *ryotwari* system introduced in Malabar was different from the other parts. An intermediary tenant class was legally recognised between the owner and the government. Land tax was calculated as follows: 50 per cent of the produce would remain with the cultivator; from the remaining 50 per cent, the government took 35 per cent as land revenue, and 15 per cent was given to the *janmi* as rent.<sup>34</sup> The government collected land revenue from tenants, not from the *janmis*. What was happening in the *ryotwari* system in Malabar was that the existing system of surplus extraction continued under the legal and procedural sanction of colonialism.<sup>35</sup>

There were contestations against the system of land settlement of the British. Nayars, Thiyyas, Tribal groups such as Kurichiyas and Kurumbas, and Mappilas staged revolts against the British during the early phase of colonial intervention. The revolt by Pazhassi Raja was a restorative attempt to establish his authority to collect rent from his tenants.<sup>36</sup> Kerala Varma, known as Pazhassi Raja, was a local chief of the Pazhassi palace of the Kottayam house. He assisted the Company in the Second (1780-1784) and Third (1790-1792) Anglo-Mysore wars. This was based on an agreement that, after defeating the Mysoreans, he would be allowed to control the Kottayam area, after paying a tribute to the Company. However, after the Third

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33 Malayil, *Riotwari*, 63.

34 A. Mohammed Hussain, 'The Impact of the British Rule on the Economy of Malabar, 1792-1857' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Calicut, 2009), 137–38.

35 T. C. Varghese, *Agrarian Change and Economic Consequences: Land Tenures in Kerala, 1850-1960* (Bombay, 1970), 28.

36 K.K.N. Kurup, 'The Peasant Revolts in Malabar (1795—1805)', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 41 (1980): 682–88.

Anglo-Mysore War, the Company extracted a higher amount from another member of the Kottayam family, Kurumbranad Raja, and granted him the right to the region. In this context, Pazhassi Raja staged an open revolt, and subsequently, in 1796, he was forced to retreat to the hills of Kottayam due to the advance of the Company Army. Pazhassi consolidated his power, stationing himself in Wayanad, with the help of Nayars, Mappilas, peasants, and tribals who were discontented with the British revenue policies.<sup>37</sup> There were various episodes of violent encounters between the army of Pazhassi Raja and the Company army from 1800 to 1805. These revolts ended in 1805 when Pazhassi was killed in the battle.

After 1805, Company officials attempted to consolidate their power in Wayanad by implementing the revenue settlement. Kurichiyas and Kurumbas were the land-holding tribes in Wayanad who also engaged in cultivation. The encroachment of the British into their traditional land rights ignited them. Pazhassi had mobilised Kurichiyas and Kurumbas against the British during his revolt. In 1812, the Kurichiyas and Kurumbas staged a rebellion against the British, during which they disarmed the revenue officials. Some of the Nayars and Thiyyas also joined them in the revolt.<sup>38</sup> However, the rebellion was suppressed within a month by a huge British Army.

The revolt by Pazhassi Raja and Kurichiyas and Kurumbas was the early contestation against the British revenue settlement. Nineteenth-century Mappila uprisings were also a manifestation result of agrarian discontent towards the British land settlement and revenue policies.

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37 K. K. N. Kurup, 'Peasant Protests and Revolts in Travancore and Malabar', in *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium*, ed. P. J. Cherian, vol. 2 (Thiruvananthapuram, 1999).

38 Kurup, 'Peasant Protests and Revolts in Travancore and Malabar', 412.

#### 1.4 Agrarian Change, Colonial Economy and New Social Groups

The British ascendancy and policies created conflicts among the native communities. The return of the old *janmis* after more than a quarter of a century and their claims to land created contestation. In fact, this contestation was not for the traditional rights over the land. The traditional *janmis* were vested with new proprietary rights, which granted them absolute ownership of the land. This intensified the conflicts, as with the new absolute property rights, *janmis* could evict any tenants at their discretion. The colonial judicial system provided legal sanctions for their arbitrary evictions. The confrontation between the Nayar *kanakkars*, who emerged during the Mysorean period as the new aristocrats, and the reinstated Brahmin *janmis* occurred in this historical context.

In fact, the social position of the *kanam* tenants had been changing at least since the eighteenth century. The existence of the cash economy and the trading activities led to the concentration of wealth in the hands of *kanam* tenants. They reinvested their wealth in land, and a large amount of land came under their possession. Malayil argued that by the eighteenth century, land emerged as commercial property that could be purchased and alienated.<sup>39</sup> Appropriating the opportunities provided by colonialism, *kanakkar* improved their socio-economic status in the nineteenth century. Panikkar noted that by the beginning of the twentieth century, *kanakkar* appropriated “35-40 per cent of the net produce, whereas the landlord’s and cultivator’s share ranged between 2 and 12, and 15 and 25 per cent respectively.”<sup>40</sup> These *kanakkars* emerged from the lower rungs of the Nayar caste.

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39 Malayil, ‘Commercialisation and Landed Proprietorship’.

40 C. A. Innes and F. B. Evans, Notes on Tenancy Legislation in Malabar, Madras, 1915, Appendix. Quoted in, K. N. Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectuals and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1998), 187.

Once the British established their rule, the wealthy Nayar *kanakkars* were not part of the bureaucracy. However, the Nayars from lower economic backgrounds took up employment opportunities in the colonial administration. Most of the village administrators, such as Menons and *Adhikaris* in 1822, were Nayars.<sup>41</sup> They quickly grasped the opportunities of English education, and whenever the British opened up higher administrative posts to the natives, it was the Nayars who seized those opportunities.

The subordination based on premodern agrarian relations was disrupted, and the economic interests of the Nayars from the *kanam* tenant class were in direct conflict with those of the Brahmin *janmis*. Within the colonial discourse, a new category of caste emerged, blurring the boundaries of the sub-castes based on the traditional occupational status. The development of transport and communication networks, new employment opportunities, urbanisation, and mobility strengthened the caste solidarities that cut across the sub-caste divisions. The development of printing press was another contributor to this process. By then, numerical strength of different groups began to matter in the bargaining equation with the colonial government. Social groups based on caste but blurring the sub-caste boundaries emerged. Chatterjee has discussed the emergence of an early modern ‘forms of sociality’ in nineteenth-century Bengal, which was different from the traditional social structure.<sup>42</sup> In Malabar, this new sociality defined the emerging Nayar middle class. The caste reform movement initiated by the Nayar middle class, particularly in the arenas of marriage and inheritance, reflects the Nayar middle class’s attempt to establish its

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41 Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 187.

42 Partha Chatterjee, *The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power* (New Delhi, 2012), 128.

social status and protect its economic interests. The class conflicts between *kanam* tenants and *janmis* became confrontations between the Nayars and Brahmins.

The social position of Thiyyas/Ezhavas also changed during the colonial period. There were a few Thiyyas who held *kanam* tenure and engaged in cultivation. Their economic position gradually improved owing to the profits received from cash crop cultivation and trade relations. There were a few, but significant, affluent sections among the Thiyyas/Ezhavas who constituted the upper strata of this caste category. The Basel Evangelical Mission, which started its missionary activity in Malabar in the fourth decade of the nineteenth century, considered them as its potential targets for conversion.<sup>43</sup> Thiyyas received an English education through the schools established by the Mission. By the second half of the nineteenth century, Thiyyas occupied positions in the colonial bureaucracy.<sup>44</sup> In the twentieth century, they were engaged in proliferating activities in trade and commerce- they also established factories. The Thiyya middle class emerged from the upper stratum of that community, and in the twentieth century, they also attempted to establish their social position. Their attempt to establish social position was in opposition to that of the Brahmins and Nayars, which created confrontation and conflicts in twentieth-century Malabar.

### **1.5 Mappilas of Malabar: Their Changing Profile**

Malabar came into contact with Islam during the seventh century AD through Arab merchants. Expansion of Islam in this region occurred through the marital relationships of Arab merchants with native women and conversions from the native

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43 Jaiprakash Raghaviah, *Faith and Industrial Reformation: Basel Mission in Malabar and South Canara* (New Delhi, 2018), 166.

44 W. R Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871, with Appendix* (Government Gazette Press, Madras, 1874), 350.

societies. *Sufi* orders also played a crucial role in the expansion of Islam. Conversion to Islam was amicable and was not contentious in Malabar during the pre-modern period. Looking at Christians and Muslims in South India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Susan Bayly pointed out that the conversion was “not an attempt to avoid caste disabilities” but to create a “ritual arena which allowed them to raise their ritual status.”<sup>45</sup> Conversion helped the natives establish an improved social position outside the existing caste structure. Ritual practices followed by the Mappilas in Malabar, which were in contrast to textual Islam and aligned with the traditional belief network, were a result of this. Capable sections within the converts could assert their higher social status by adopting the practices of higher castes and rejecting certain practices of Islamic societies. For instance, Burbosa noted that a section of Mappilas in Malabar followed the traditions of Nayars in clothing and inheritance.<sup>46</sup> The existence of matrilineal households in Malabar also implied adoption by Muslims. This suggests that, although a separate identity existed between the Mappilas and other belief systems, the boundaries were blurred and there was little contention and conflict.

Expansion of Portuguese power invoked and strengthened the religious identity of Muslims. For the Portuguese, Muslims were both economic and religious enemies. The prolonged confrontations and conflicts with the Portuguese since 1500 brought significant changes to the Mappilas. The initial economic prosperity of the Mappilas declined due to disruptions in trade activities. A military tradition emerged

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45 Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900*, Cambridge South Asian Studies 43 (Cambridge, 2009), 457.

46 Mansel Longworth Dames, ed., *The Book of Durate Barbosa. An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants, Written by Durate Barbosa and Completed about the Year 1518 A.D.*, II (London, 1921), 74.

among the Mappilas, with a section within the Mappila community, known as the Marakkars, establishing itself as a hereditary warrior group. There was a proliferation of *jihadist* literature in Malabar during the sixteenth century, which articulated the fight against the Portuguese as a religious responsibility of Muslims. Due to the global networks of Portuguese expansion, literature produced during this period was intended to address the international Muslim community.<sup>47</sup> However, there was no significant shift in the relationship between the Mappilas and the other sections of the native society. Examining the literature produced by the Muslim *ulamas* during the sixteenth century, Kooria observed that Muslims “maintained allegiance to local, non-Muslim rulers who valued their loyalty.”<sup>48</sup> The confrontation between the Portuguese and Muslims in Malabar during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was motivated by economic and religious grievances and was sanctioned by the traditional political authorities.

The Portuguese lost control over Malabar by 1663, and the Dutch gained control. The contestation between Muslims and the Portuguese waned since then. From the last decades of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century, “religious landscapes continue to function passively without any internal or external struggles.”<sup>49</sup> Muslim *ulamas* no longer produced the fatwas and literature against Europeans. Instead, they engaged in internal religious discourses, especially

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47 Mahmood Kooria, “‘Killed the Pilgrims and Persecuted Them’: Portuguese Estado Da India’s Encounters with the Hajj in the Sixteenth Century’, in *The Hajj and Europe in the Age of Empire*, ed. Umar Riyad, Leiden Studies in Islam and Society, vol. 5 (Leiden, 2017).

48 Mahmood Kooria, ‘An Abode of Islam under a Hindu King: Circuitous Imagination of Kingdoms among Muslims of Sixteenth-Century Malabar’, *The Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 103, <https://doi.org/10.26443/jiows.v1i1.21>.

49 Mahmood Kooria, ‘Politics, Economy and Islam in “Dutch Ponnāni”, Malabar Coast’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62, no. 1 (2019): 23.

on Sunni-Shia debates. The Mysorean invasion of Malabar in 1766 facilitated the spread of Shias in the region, and the debates occurred in this context.<sup>50</sup> In sharp contrast to the sixteenth-century practice of using the Arabic language, *ulamas* used Malayalam. Religious literature began to emerge in Arabic-Malayalam, a style in which the Malayalam language was written using the Arabic script. To be precise, in the period between the Portuguese decline and British emergence, Muslims in Malabar became a pacified, inward-looking religious community.

Mysorean rule in Malabar did not bring any significant change in the religious life of Muslims. At the same time, during the flight of *janmis*, Mappila tenants enjoyed considerable privileges. When *janmis* re-established their power and became the owners of land with absolute property rights, it had new implications for the Mappilas. The returned *janmis* were antagonistic towards Mappilas due to their religious affiliations. The Mysorean invasion, by then, had established itself as the Muslim invasion, and the Mappilas of the Malabar were perceived as collaborators of the Mysore rulers. A religious antagonism emerged between *janmis* and Mappilas. The agrarian issues, combined with religious overtones, were the causes for the nineteenth-century Mappila uprisings.

The development of pan-Islamism was an important aspect of the religious landscape of Mappilas in Malabar. This tendency was visible since the eighteenth century. The discussions of the internal elements of religion, has always tended to draw on global Islam to determine which practices are right and wrong. In fact, there was an outward-looking tendency in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, by

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50 Tipu was Shia and encouraged the Shia sufis to settle in the different parts of his kingdom. In Malabar, Kondotty emerged as an important centre of Shia Muslims during this period, while Ponnani remained a stronghold of Sunni Muslims. See, Kooria, 'Politics, Economy and Islam in "Dutch Ponnāni", Malabar Coast', 26–27.

*ulamas* and religious scholars who settled mainly in Ponnani, particularly in the context of Portuguese rivalry. They released texts in Arabic languages which sought political support from the Islamic world against the Portuguese. However, in the eighteenth century, the content of the internal debates centred on the authenticity of religious practices. Texts were produced in Arabic-Malayalam. The Arabic-Malayalam printing press emerged in Malabar during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>51</sup> Early attempts for the reform in the religion and religious education within Mappilas by Sanahulla Makti Thangal (1847-1912). The establishment of the Dar-ul-Uloom *madrassa*<sup>52</sup> in 1871 at Vazhakkad was defined around the debate where in each side claimed to establish their position on the basis of the doctrines of textual Islam. The expansion of the *Islahi* movement was another catalyst in the pan-Islamic shift among the Mappilas. The *Islahi* movement always looked at global Islam. Ottoman Khalifate, by then, emerged as a reference point for the Mappilas in Malabar. Arabic-Malayalam press published reports about developments in the global Islamic reform movement. For instance, works of Egyptian reformer Mohammad Abduh (1849-1905) were translated, and his activities were reported in the Arabic-Malayalam press.<sup>53</sup> The wider sections of the Mappilas in Malabar came into contact with the dynamics of global Islam. This trend crystallised in the early twentieth century. In 1909, Makti Thangal started an evening newspaper called *Turkey Samacharam* to discuss Turkey. Colonial officials also noted the

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51 First Arabic-Malayalam press was established by Teeputhil Kunhammad in Thalasserry in 1868. Several printing presses were subsequently established in Kozhikode, Kondotty, Mapappuram, Ponnani, and Thirurangadi, among others.

52 Madrasas are the educational places to prepare and train the children in theology and religious life.

53 The publication, like *Swadeshbhimani* and *Muslim*, established by Vakkam Moulavi (1873-1932), republished the translation of his work. See, L. R. S. Lakshmi, *The Malabar Muslims: A Different Perspective* (Delhi, 2012), 88–91.

growing concern about Turkey's development during the early twentieth century.<sup>54</sup> It suggests that when World War I ended, and the Khilafat in Turkey was ill-treated, a sentiment among the Mappilas existed that such ill-treatment was a humiliation for each of them. In 1921, the emerging national movement provided a political platform for expressing concerns over economic and religious grievances. The Malabar rebellion of 1921 was a result of the contestation that emerged from the political emergence of Mappilas within nationalism.

### **1.6 Political mobilisation of Masses: Congress and the Communist**

The national movement under the Indian National Congress began to gain momentum in Malabar only during the Home Rule Movement. Before that, there were just a few educated Nayers who attended the annual sessions of the Congress.<sup>55</sup> Although a Malabar District Congress Committee was formed in 1910, its activities were minimal, with meetings held only once or twice a year to elect new office-bearers.

The Home Rule Movement expanded the Congress activity, and the branches of Home Rule and Congress formed together in different parts. The organisational base of the Congress was limited to the upper sections of society. *Janmis* holding significant power within the Congress. For instance, in 1916, Vasudeva Raja of

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54 Mappilas collected funds to send to Turkey during the Balkan War(1912-1913). At the Perinthalmanna Mosque, they conducted forty days of prayer for Turkey in 1912. See, O. P. Salahudheen, 'Political Ferment in Malabar', *Social Scientist* 35, no. 11/12 (2007): 29. A newspaper in the firm Cochin noted that "Aggressive sympathy shown by Moplals in a number of places in Malabar for the Ottoman Empire in its war with Italy". The 1912 report of the district magistrate stated that the Mappilas in centres such as Malappuram, Perinthalmanna, and Mampad were following the news of the Balkan War with keen interest. See, M. Gangadhara Menon, 'The Malabar Rebellion 1921-22' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Calicut, 1985), 83-84.

55 C. Sankaran Nayar, G. P. Pilla, V. Ryrnambiyar, C. Kunhiraman Menon, Mannath Krishnan Nayar, C. Karunakara Menon, K. P. Achutha Menon, K. U. Narayana Menon and T. M. Nayar were some of the educated Nayers who attended the annual meetings of the Indian National Congress. C. Sankaran Nayar presided over the thirteenth session of the Amaravathi Conference in 1897. See, P. K. K. Menon, *The History of Freedom Movement in Kerala* (Thiruvananthapuram, 2001), 2:83-84.

Kollengode, a *janmi* and member of the traditional ruling family, served as the chairman of the organising committee for the annual conference of the Malabar District Congress Committee in Palakkad. In 1918, when the District Conference of the Congress was held at Thalassery, Rama Varma Valiya Raja of Chirakkal was the chairman of the reception committee. Manavedan Thirumulpad, the Raja of the Nilambur Kovilakom, was the chairman of the reception committee at the district conference in Manjeri in 1920.<sup>56</sup> Although the middle class, comprising the *kanam* tenants, attempted to pass a resolution in favour of the tenancy legislation, it was defeated at this conference due to the strong influence of the *janmis*.<sup>57</sup>

A change in the class composition of the Congress was brought about by the Manjeri conference of the Malabar District Congress in 1920. The Manjeri conference was held amid political turmoil. The Montagu-Chelmsford recommendations, failure of the Khilafat deputation, atrocities of Jallianwallah Bagh and other parts of Punjab, had produced a consciousness that an intense struggle was needed. Nearly 1,300 people attended the Manjeri conference, with a significant participation by Mappila tenants. Despite objections from Annie Besant and other moderate leaders, the conference passed resolutions in support of the Khilafat and the legislation on tenancy.<sup>58</sup> *Janmis* and moderate leaders such as Annie Besant walked out of the conference in protest against the resolutions passed.

During the Khilafat Movement, the mass base of the Congress expanded. Congress and Khilafat committees were almost identical at the local levels. The lower

56 Menon, *The History of Freedom Movement in Kerala*, 2:91–92.

57 K. N. Panikkar, 'Agrarian Legislation and Social Classes: A Case Study of Malabar', *Economic and Political Weekly* 13, no. 21 (1978): 886.

58 Resolutions which demanded regulating working hours in factories, prohibition of child labour in factories, protection of the freedom of the Press, and repealing the Planters' Labour Law were also passed.

peasantry, particularly from the Mappilas in Eranad and Valluvanad taluks, became involved in Congress activities. The state repression against the Khilafat/ Non-Cooperation movement and the Malabar Rebellion of 1921 disrupted Congress activities. Muslims lost their trust in the Congress. For Hindus, the Congress became an organisation that compounded their miseries. Congress again shrank to an organisation of middle-class Nayers.

Congress activities began to strengthen again during the Civil Disobedience Movement. Civil Disobedience in Malabar was multifocal. Apart from the salt satyagraha, the Congress in Malabar also organised an anti-liquor campaign, a forest satyagraha, and a temple entry movement, focusing on multiple arenas. The support base of the Civil Disobedience remained the Nayar middle class; however, new young political activists from petty traders, elementary school teachers, and low-ranking bureaucrats such as clerks also joined the Congress. However, during 1930-1935, lower sections of society and the wealthy landlords stayed away from the Congress activities. A. K. Gopalan, an active Congress member during that period, noted that the struggles, such as picketing, did not bring in workers and peasants. There was no change in the attitude of middle class Congress activists towards the lower peasantry. The distinction between the lower castes and the upper castes remained as before.<sup>59</sup>

The lower sections of the society began to be part of the Congress after 1935 through the activities of the Congress Socialist Party (hereafter CSP). Most of the Congress volunteers who participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement were arrested and imprisoned in the jails of Madras Presidency. This provided an opportunity for these young activists to meet the left revolutionaries from Bengal and

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59 A. K. Gopalan, *Ente Agnipareekshakal* (Kozhikode, 2016), 40.

other parts of North India.<sup>60</sup> It was through these interactions that the young Congress activists realised the necessity of mobilising the peasants and workers for the national movement. The Congress Socialist Party was formed on May 12, 1934, at Calicut. Unlike the earlier Congress leaders, these young Congress Socialists actively mobilised peasants and workers. Trade unions and peasant unions were formed across Malabar. A. K Gopalan noted: “Situation changed by 1936-1937. Bus owners let us travel in buses for free. Villagers provided food and extended help. They began to realise what Congress is.”<sup>61</sup> New political subjects began to emerge from the lower social classes.

Since the beginning, a section within the CSP expressed its affiliations with the Communists. In fact, the second conference of the Congress Socialist Party had accepted the relevance of Marxism-Leninism. Communists in Malabar initially worked within the CSP, but they had issues with the class characteristics of some leaders and their compromising strategies. However, such conflicts were not explicitly expressed because, by then, the Communists had adopted the Dutt-Bradley thesis which underlined the unity of all anti-imperialist forces in the national struggle.<sup>62</sup> The importance of the Congress was acknowledged, and the responsibility of the Congress Socialists and the Communists was to strengthen the Congress activities. A Communist group was formed inside the Congress in 1937, and in December 1939, the Communist Party of India (CPI) was set up in Malabar. Nevertheless, Communists continued to function within the Congress until September 1940.

60 During this period, the Bengal revolutionaries and the convicts of the Lahore Conspiracy case were imprisoned in the jails of the Madras Presidency, such as Kannur, Coimbatore, Vellur and Tiruchirappalli.

61 Gopalan, *Ente Agnipareekshakal*, 39. Translation mine.

62 Dutt-Bradley Thesis was published in the Journal of Communist International on February 29, 1936.

This overview of the development of politics in Malabar provides insight into how different sections of Malabar society emerged as political subjects. Modern political organisations were a crucial component in collective actions during the twentieth century. In the earlier period, the *janmis* and educated Nayers held dominance within the Congress. By 1920, the Nayar middle class, comprising the *kanam* tenants, had become a powerful force. It was after 1935 that the lower peasants and workers emerged as a significant force in the political sphere. These subalterns engaged with the national movement through the organisation provided by the Congress Socialists and the Communists. In another sense, the ways in which subaltern groups emerged as a political force in the twentieth century differed from how elites became political subjects. Guha has sighted masses “exceeding the limits set by the national leadership” in Bombay in 1921 and Chauri Chaura in February 1922.<sup>63</sup> In Malabar, the masses also had a different organisation. The consciousness developed by the subalterns in Malabar differed from that of the elites, and it was these sections that acted as a decisive force in the social transition of colonial Malabar.

### Chapters

This thesis is organised into six chapters. This study examines the contestation and conflict that arose in the arenas of caste, religion, and the interactions between peasants and workers in colonial Malabar. This thesis follows a thematic progression and often overlaps chronologically.

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63 Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1997), 150.

This first chapter gives an introduction to the thesis by discussing the historiographical and historical context of the present study. An overview of the Pre-colonial and colonial Malabar society is precisely discussed in the introduction.

The second chapter examines the contestation and conflicts surrounding the circulation and social mobility of caste groups. This chapter encapsulates the features of pre-modern caste structures. The Mysorean invasion disrupted the traditional caste hierarchy. During British rule, the caste structure underwent significant changes. The mobility and consolidation of different caste groups, the emergence of a 'middle class' from the lower section of the Nayar caste and the upper layer of the Thiyya caste, resulted in contestation and conflict between these groups. The consolidation of the Nayar caste and their contestations against the Brahmins brought up a series of legislative interventions that redefined social customs and agrarian relations. A detailed discussion of the caste assertion of Thiyyas and their contestation with Brahmins and Nayar is presented, along with an examination of the events surrounding interpersonal conflicts. The dynamics of dalit caste assertion and contestation related to it were different from those of Nayars and Thiyyas.

The third chapter is a discussion on the nature of contestation and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in Malabar. This chapter attempts to conceptualise the Hindu-Muslim relationship in pre-colonial and colonial Malabar. The formation of the Mappila community and Muslim identity happened during the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the other hand, a Hindu community in Malabar emerged during the British colonial period. The Malabar rebellion of 1921 significantly impacted the formation and consolidation of communal identities. Following the rebellion, the contestations and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims took a new

shape in Malabar. The contestation and conflicts that emerged over the issue of constructing or reconstructing mosques often emerged. Another dynamic of contestation was related to temple festivals and musical processions. Both these dynamics, contestation over the religious spaces and the musical processions, are discussed in detail in this chapter. This chapter also examines how religious identities were invoked in every dispute and instance of interpersonal violence during this period. In this manner, this chapter provides an overview of the transition that occurred in Hindu-Muslim relations and the nature of contestation between these two communities.

The fourth chapter discusses the nature of contestation related to peasant movements. This chapter does not treat peasants as a homogeneous category. British revenue policies, which aimed at maximum extraction, impacted the different sections of Malabar's peasantry in varying degrees. The dynamics and the nature of peasant contestation are discussed in detail. This chapter offers a comprehensive overview of peasant discontent and the dynamics of violence in the early colonial and in the beginning of the twentieth century. The activities and agitations of the peasant union from 1935 to 1947 are discussed. Incidents at Morazha in 1940 and conflicts in Karivallur and Kavumbayi in 1946 are discussed in detail, making an attempt to understand the dynamics of violence in the peasant movements of colonial Malabar.

The fifth chapter of this thesis examines the contestations and conflicts associated with the industrial strikes in colonial Malabar. The features of urbanisation and industrialisation, as well as the anti-colonial politics that developed in urban spaces, are discussed in this chapter. This discusses the different phases of trade union politics and workers' strikes. The years from 1935 to 1937 constitute the early phase

of trade union activities. Trade union politics came under the influence of the communist party during the period from 1937 to 1940. Numerous strikes emerged during this period across industries. Workers' strikes became more militant in the late colonial era. This chapter tries to understand the nature of the workers' militancy, focusing on the strikes at Aron Spinning and Weaving Mill from 1940 to 1946.

The final Chapter, Conclusion, summarises the findings and influences of the study in its totality.

## Chapter 2

### Caste Circulation and Social Mobility in Malabar

Socio-economic and political interplays in colonial Malabar reconfigured the caste system. The expansion of the modern colonial state and capitalist-imperialist economy disrupted the traditional caste system. The emergence of socio-political movements and nascent collectivities in the context of colonial modernity expedited this decline. The caste hierarchy was redefined, and the hegemony of the upper castes was persistently challenged. The caste circulation of the lower castes, capturing social spaces, was countered by the dominant caste through coercion and violence.

The emergence of the ‘subaltern counter publics’<sup>1</sup> and the contestations were not limited to intellectual debates and political demonstrations. Instead, this chapter argues that violence was an intrinsic part of the social process by which lower sections of the caste societies established their social equality. Violence operated at multiple levels in the restructuring of the traditional caste system. Lower castes were not only the victims of upper caste violence, but at many levels, they were active agents in using violence as a tool to establish their equality or dominance. While explaining the dynamics of caste violence in the twentieth century, this chapter also encapsulates the dynamics of the caste structure and violence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This will help to understand the larger picture of caste transformation.

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1 Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, in *Public Space Reader* (2021), 34.

There has been enormous scholarship on caste in India since the British rule. New scholarship on caste has criticised the orientalist perception of the static Indian caste system and accused these “earlier specialists of massively overstating the importance of the caste.”<sup>2</sup> The intention here is not to get into those debates or to trace out various theories on caste but to recollect some generally agreed understanding for our study. First, scholars argued that before the establishment of the colonial modern state, the sense of community among the natives was “multiple and layered and fuzzy.”<sup>3</sup> Second, the administrative tools of a colonial state, such as census and cartography, were so imperative in creating new caste consciousness among the Indians.<sup>4</sup> Third, by the end of the nineteenth century, “caste was firmly established in colonial state governance as a key organisation feature of native society, the colonial state itself systematised and gave administrative priority to what we now think of as caste.”<sup>5</sup> In colonial discourse, the brahminical perception of caste had been used as a “frame of reference,” and objectified caste identities were incorporated into the administrative narratives.<sup>6</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, colonial subjects were seen themselves within this discourse, and new caste identities emerged.<sup>7</sup>

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2 Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, The New Cambridge History of India, IV, 3 (New York, 1999), 2.

3 Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York, 2010), 194.

4 Bernard S. Cohn, ‘The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia’, in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, by Bernard S. Cohn (New Delhi, 2006).

5 Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India* (New York, 2014), 8.

6 K.S. Madhavan, ‘Caste and Colonialism: Situating William Logan and Samuel Mateer in the Administrative Ideology and Missionary Discourse of Colonial Kerala’, *Calicut University Research Journal* 4, no. 1 (2003): 88.

7 For instance, while discussing the process of the census, Cohen says that the census reached practically everyone and the colonial questions about various aspects of their everyday life, past and culture “provided an arena for Indians to ask questions about

## 2.1 Caste Structure in Pre-British Malabar

When we use the term caste in the context of colonial Malabar, it refers to *jati* without any ambiguity. Scholarship on caste have agreed that the fourfold *varna* system is a textual or theoretical framework and the everyday reality of caste was based on *jatis*.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Malabar, the distinction between the *savarana* and *avarana* systems was not based on the fourfold *varna* framework.<sup>9</sup> The theoretical legitimacy of Nambutiri Brahmins for their superior position in the caste hierarchy and possession of land and other material resources derived not from the laws of *Manu* but from the legend *Keralolpathy* (origin of Kerala).<sup>10</sup>

The prevailing caste system in Malabar was inherently connected with land relations, which was called the *janmi-kudiyam* system or *janmam-kanam sampradayam*.<sup>11</sup> This system referred to the traditional understanding of the rights and obligations of landlord, tenant, and other people engaged with agricultural production and the land. Historians generally agree that the *janmi* system emerged in Kerala

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themselves, and Indians utilised the fact that the British census commissioners tried to order tables on caste in terms of social precedence". Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia', 230.

- 8 Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*.
- 9 K. N. Sunandan, *Caste, Knowledge, and Power: Ways of Knowing in Twentieth-Century Malabar* (Cambridge; New York, 2022), 141.
- 10 The census report of the Madras presidency in 1871 states that Nambutiris "account their possession of the land by a legend, ... Parasu Rama caused the sea to recede from the strip of land called Kerala and retired thither. The Brahmins followed him and extorted from the wearied deity the whole land he reclaimed." W. R. Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871, with Appendix* (Government Gazette Press, Madras, 1874), 350. When speaking of the Nambutiris in Malabar, Buchanan notes that "the laws of Menu(Manu) seems to be totally unknown to the Nambutiris." Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara, and Malabar* (Madras, n.d.), 2:425.
- 11 K.N. Ganesh, 'Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala: Janmam—Kanam Relations during the 16th-18th Centuries', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 28, no. 3 (1991): 300, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001946469102800304>.

during the twelfth century, when decentralised political and economic powers emerged in the post-Chera period.<sup>12</sup> This system was based on the vertical distribution of land tenures and the extraction of the surplus through the layered hierarchy. Three important types of tenure categories prevailed: *janmam*, *kanam*, and *verumpattam*. *Janmam* was the superior tenure, denoting the customary ownership of the land. The one who held this *janmam* right is called *janmi*. In the early centuries, it might have been considered merely as ‘life interest in the soil’ since the word *janmam* in Sanskrit and Malayalam literally means ‘birth’.<sup>13</sup> Also, the *janmam* property was not considered hereditary in its earlier period. Brahmins and temples became big landowners through generous grants to the *naduvazhis* (local chieftains). These customary landowners did not cultivate directly, thus, by the twelfth century, *kudiyan* system had emerged with hierarchical rights over the land. Local chieftains at the top were followed by the ‘customary land owners, intermediary tenants, settled tenant cultivators and bonded service classes’ at the bottom.<sup>14</sup>

The changes in the agrarian economy, especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, led to the development of different land tenure categories. The expansion of cultivation by clearing forests, the development of garden crops, and the cash economy due to external trade relations contributed to the growth of land leases/mortgages. *Kanam*, *kuzhikanam*, *otti*, and *verumpattam* were the most important tenures that emerged in this context.<sup>15</sup> *Kuzhikanam* tenure was provided for

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12 A Sreedhara Menon, *Social and Cultural History of Kerala* (New Delhi, 1979), 51.

13 V V Kunhi Krishnan, *Tenancy Legislation in Malabar: (1880 - 1970); an Historical Analysis* (New Delhi, 1993), 5.

14 Ganesh, ‘Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala’, 301.

15 Many other types of deed emerged at various points in time. For instance, Logan talks about deeds like *ottikkum purameyullakanam*, by which *anmi* obtained ten percentage or more on the sum received for the *otti* right; the *nirmutal*, by which the *janmi* takes more

the agricultural expansion and improvement. *Janmis* did not take any advance since the tenants had to invest in the resources for bringing the uncultivated land under cultivation, and plant and grow new trees.<sup>16</sup> The expansion of paddy cultivation by clearing the forests, and the growth of garden crops cultivation were associated with granting *kuzhikanam*.<sup>17</sup> These tenants were entitled to pay reduced rent in the initial years. In the case of *otti* tenure, *janmi* took more advance and exempted the tenant from the rent.

*Kanam* was a simple lease which had to be renewed every twelfth year. Those who held the *kanam* tenure were known as the *kanakkar* or *kanamdar*. The civil and military servants of the local rulers and the people associated with the temples formed this group of tenures. Scholars argued that the “growth of *kanam* tenure clearly denoted the rise of a new intermediate landholding class who had access to wealth and who could dictate more favourable terms and conditions with the *janmis* than ordinary cultivators.”<sup>18</sup> The nature of *kanam* tenure was varied across regions. In northern Malabar, *kanam* tenure was a lease, and here, most of the *kanakkars* directly cultivated the land. In southern Malabar, it was more or less a mortgage and cultivation was done through the intermediaries. This kind of sub-leasing of the land to another tenant for cultivation is known as the *verumpattam* (simple lease). This tenure was only for one year and came with minimal rights in the land. There are instances where *janmi* directly provides *verumpattam*. Though entitled to one-third of

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than any other lease by conferring the water credits, and *janmapanayam*, where the *janmam* right was pledged. All of these leases emerged in the context of the requirement for more income. See, William Logan, *Malabar Manual* (Madras, 1887), 1:608.

16 K. N. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar, 1836-1921* (Delhi, 1989), 26.

17 Ganesh, ‘Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala’, 308–9.

18 Ganesh, ‘Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala’, 309.

the produce, they were mostly left with only the cost of the cultivation and made no difference to the agricultural labourer.<sup>19</sup> There were the bonded labourers who constituted the agricultural workers.

The surplus produced had been extracted through this hierarchical tenure relationship. According to the customary practices, after deducting the amount of the seeds and the expense of cultivation, the produce was divided into three. Each of these tenures got one-third of it. Here, it should be looked into very carefully that none of this group had the absolute land ownership in the soil. The absorption of the share by the non-cultivating classes was justified as the return for their service to the society.

As elsewhere, the transition to the agrarian society, which depended on the hierarchical surplus extraction, necessitated the incorporation of the pre-existing social categories into this structure. Such integration and placing in order was important for the establishment for the pre-modern network of authorities. It was on this basis that the system of *naduvazhis* (local chieftains) emerged in the political sphere as the administrators or the local rulers. And different sections of the society were conceptualised serving different needs of the society and occupying some places in this hierarchy. Castes established as an hierarchical order in this agrarian society. Thus, the *jati-janmi-naduvazhi* (caste-landlord-local chieftain) system emerged as the socio-economic and political system in pre-modern Kerala.<sup>20</sup>

The rulers and Brahmins had appropriated the entire land and other means of production, which were then distributed among other sections of society for the production process. Channelising various surpluses produced toward the *janmis* was

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19 Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 28.

20 E. M. S Nambutirippad, *Kerala charithram Marxist veeekshanathil* (Thiruvananthapuram, 2012), 27–31.

important for maintaining the system. Establishing a socio-cultural system based on the ideological and ethical framework of this extraction became necessary. In this context, myths, institutions and customary practices were established to legitimise and instate the domination of the upper strata. Mythical story about the origin of Kerala, *Keralolpathy*, served as a tool not only to establish the authority of Brahmins but also to legitimise the social position of every caste.<sup>21</sup> This narration reconciled the series of contradictions between the Brahmins of Kerala and the norms laid out in the Vedic writings functioned as the ideological tool for Brahmin supremacy.<sup>22</sup>

*Maryada* emerged as a customary understanding of the obligations of various sections associated with production relations. This vocabulary was used earlier to denote the tenant's obligation towards the *janmis*.<sup>23</sup> Looking at the use of this term in the eighteenth-century Thalassery Records, Davis shows that the term transcended the meaning to something that signified the 'moral and legal boundaries established in a community'.<sup>24</sup> In pre-modern Kerala, the application of *maryada* was not standardised, but it was localised.<sup>25</sup> Though the localised myths, customs and norms

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21 *Keralolpathy* was only recorded in writing in the eighteenth century, but scholars attribute an earlier existence in the oral form since the legend of Parasurama and the creation of Kerala from the sea was mentioned in earlier records. The *Raghuvamsa* by Kalidasa and the *Tiruvilangadu* plates of the Rajendra Chola (1012-1044) refer to this legend. See A Sreedhara Menon, *Survey of Kerala History* (2010), 7.

22 For an elaborative understanding about *Keralolpathy* and its ideological functions, see, Geneviève Lemercinier, 'Relationships between Means of Production, Caste and Religion: The Case of Kerala between the 13th and the 19th Century', *Social Compass* 28, nos 2–3 (1981): 163–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003776868102800202>.

23 Ganesh, 'Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala', 303.

24 Donald R. Davis, 'Dharma, Maryada, and Law in Early British Malabar: Remarks on Words for "Law" in the Tellicherry Records', *Studien Zur Indologie Und Iranistik* 23 (2002): 60.

25 The existence of different terms such as *kizhmaryada*, *nattumaryada*, *desamryada*, *sanketamaryada*, etc., denotes the different customary practices applicable for different local units, *nadu*, *desam*, or *sanketam*. Ganesh, 'Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala', 304.

were established to mitigate the contradictions within brahminic practices in the specific context of pre-modern Kerala, it is wrong to assume that the brahminic authority in Kerala was established autonomously without the influence of north Indian Vedic texts. When speaking of the *Nambutiris* in Malabar, Buchanan noted that “the laws of Menu (Manu) seems to be totally unknown to the *Nambutiris*”.<sup>26</sup> More recent studies explored that such essentialisations are contradictory to the facts. The existence of dharma texts like *Iaghudharmaprasika* or *sankarasmriti*, dated to the fifteenth century, and their prominent similarities with the *dharmasastra* tradition have been brought to light by studies.<sup>27</sup> In other words, through the sourcing of the *dharmasastra* tradition in the localised social space, the cultural practices and ideological logic of the Nambutiri Brahmins fixed the hierarchical places and community obligations for each social groups in pre-eighteenth century Kerala.

The land holding *janmis* in the pre-British Malabar were either the Brahmins, or the local rulers mostly from the Nayars. The Brahmins of Malabar are either Nambutiris or Pattar.<sup>28</sup> There were also different Brahmins, considered inferior to the Nambutiris or Pattar, such as Elayads, Embrantiri, Nambidis, etc.<sup>29</sup> There is no generally agreed-upon understanding about the origin, period of Brahmin migration to Kerala, and the existence of 32 early Brahmin settlements.<sup>30</sup> However, historians of

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26 Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara, and Malabar*, 2:425.

27 Donald R. Davis, ‘Recovering the Indigenous Legal Traditions of India: Classical Hindu Law in Practice in Late Medieval Kerala’, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (1999): 159–213, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026483519342>.

28 Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871, with Appendix*, 350.

29 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:120.

30 Some historians say that Brahmins migrated to Kerala from the Gangetic plains through Tamil Nadu, while others say they migrated through Karnataka. Some others also describe the migration of the Brahmins from the Konkan region. See, Rajangurukkal and Raghavavariyar, *History of Kerala: Prehistoric to the Present* (Hyderabad, 2020).

medieval Kerala generally agree that the domination of Brahmins and establishing a segregated agrarian society happened between the tenth and eleventh centuries.<sup>31</sup> Temples also emerged in various parts of Kerala along with the Brahmin settlements, and rulers gave land grants to maintain the temples and Brahmin settlements. In most cases, it is argued that these grants did not provide the absolute right over the land but the right to a share of the produce from that land.<sup>32</sup> The establishment of the tenurial right by Brahmins occurred much later, and this intersects with the establishment of the ideological and cultural superiority of the Brahmins in the region.<sup>33</sup> They constituted almost one per cent of the total population in the twentieth century.<sup>34</sup>

The upper strata of the Nayars were the local chieftains and the *janmis*. They were not considered as Kshatriyas, but Sudras. Yet they were the non-Brahmin upper caste just below the Nambutiris in the customs and practices but almost equal or above in terms of political authority. However the significant population of the Nayars were tenants who held the *kanam* tenure. They were not a traditional cultivating caste,

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Kesavan Veluthad attributed the Aryan Brahmin colonisation to the Sangam age. Kesavan Veluthad, *Brahmin Settlements in Kerala: Historical Studies* (Calicut University, 1978), iii. M.G.S. Narayan also suggested an ancient origin of Brahmin settlement. M. G. S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala: Political and Social Conditions of Kerala Under the Cēra Perumals of Makotai (c. 800 A.D.-1124 A.D.)* (1996). Looking at the archaeological evidence and other sources, scholars also attribute a much later date for the Brahmin migration. See, K Rajan, 'Deeply Enmeshed in Colonial Notions about Aryan Superiority: Revisiting the Kerala Histories on Brahmin Settlements', *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 8, no. 1 (2020): 126–43.

- 31 Ganesh, 'Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala', 301. See also, Veluthad, *Brahman Settlements in Kerala*, 39.
- 32 K.S. Madhavan, 'Primary Producing Groups in Early Medieval Kerala: Production Process and Historical Roots of Transition to Castes (300-1300 CE)', (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Calicut, 2012), 495.
- 33 Scholars argue that the transformation of Nambutiris from the managers of the temple land to the *janmis* having customary ownership of the land occurred by the end of the thirteenth century. See, Lemercinier, 'Relationships between Means of Production, Caste and Religion', 171.
- 34 Eric J. Miller, 'Caste and Territory in Malabar', *American Anthropologist* 56, no. 3 (1954): 411.

but a service caste whose income came from the civil or military services and rent from the land lease.<sup>35</sup> They constituted the “principal body of Hindus in Malabar, and possess and cultivate the larger portion of the land.”<sup>36</sup> They were considered the protectors of society, making them the most important functionaries in the ‘body politic.’<sup>37</sup> The share they receive from the product is attributed to their services as the protectors and the overseers. This caste was not monolithic but aggregated various other sub-castes with the internal hierarchy.<sup>38</sup> By the twentieth century, Nayers were twenty per cent of the total population and constituted a significant portion of the Hindu middle class.<sup>39</sup> The lower Nayers held *verumpattam* tenants. A substantial section of Mappilas and Thiyyas also became *verumpattam* tenants since the sixteenth century.<sup>40</sup>

The caste system was a determinant in non-agricultural production as well. Scholars have argued that commodity production was less developed in pre-colonial Kerala, and even the specialised caste’s limited expansion of craft production was also controlled by the caste hierarchy.<sup>41</sup> Occupational castes such as Thiyya, Mukkuva (fisherman), Vannan (washerman) were also incorporated in to the caste hierarchy.

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35 Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 28.

36 Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871, with Appendix*, 350.

37 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:132.

38 Logan listed eighteen sub-castes among Nayers, such as Menon, Menokki, Muppil Nayar, Pada Nayar, Kurupp, Kaimal, Panikkar, etc. See, Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:133–34.

39 Miller, ‘Caste and Territory in Malabar’, 411.

40 The expansion of Mappilas into the rural Malabar and agriculture was due to two reason. First was in the context of Portuguese hostility and second was through the conversion of the dalit castes. This is discussed in detail in the second chapter.

41 P. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* (New Delhi, 2015), 20.

Among these, Thiyyas require special mention because it is one of the caste groups that this chapter focuses on. They were known as Thiyyas in northern Malabar, Ezhavas in Palakkad and Valluvanad *taluks* of southern Malabar. Most of the Thiyyas were toddy tapers, but they were also placed as the service caste. They were the foot soldiers attached to the land of Nayars.<sup>42</sup> The census of 1871 mentions Thiyyas as a peculiar caste to Malabar. They were considered an “upper polluting caste.” The artisan castes, such as carpenters and blacksmiths, and many other castes, such as astrologers, physicians and launderers, were considered roughly equal to Thiyyas.<sup>43</sup> Logan considered Thiyyas/ Ezhavas one of the numerically strongest caste groups in Malabar.<sup>44</sup> Notwithstanding the constraints of their inferior position in the caste structure, they “produced a high percentage of middle-class professionals and bureaucrats during the colonial period.”<sup>45</sup>

Dalits were the productive labourers in both agricultural and non-agricultural sectors.<sup>46</sup> They did not possess any land rights or means of production and were considered ‘untouchables’ in the caste hierarchy. In Malabar, dalit population mainly consisted of castes like Cherumar, Pulayar, Parayar, Nayadis, etc. As per a census of 1857 quoted by Logan, the population of these groups was 187,812 out of 1,602,914 of the total population.<sup>47</sup> Cherumar and Pulayar were bonded labourers on the agricultural land. They were sold and purchased along with the transfer of land

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42 James John, *The Portuguese and the Socio-Cultural Changes in Kerala: 1498-1663* (New Delhi, 2020), 55.

43 Miller, ‘Caste and Territory in Malabar’, 411.

44 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:142.

45 K. Sreejith, *The Middle Class in Colonial Malabar: A Social History* (New Delhi, 2021), 23.

46 Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery*, 20.

47 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:147.

tenures, and this practice was considered agrarian slavery by the colonialists. They lived mainly in southern Malabar, especially in the Eranad, Valluvanad and Ponnani *taluks* of the British Malabar.<sup>48</sup>

There were the tribal groups, such as Malayar, Paniyar, Kurichyas, etc., who lived in the forests. The extraction of forest resources in the political economy of *jati-janmi-naduvazhi* system happened through them. They were placed at the lowest in the traditional caste hierarchy and considered outcasts. The census report of 1871 noted that “incredible it may seem, some if the hill tribes are disdainfully treated, and a Brahmin puts a hundred paces between a creature so low the social scale and his nobility.”<sup>49</sup>

To be precise, by the eighteenth century, *jatis* constituted the primary socio-cultural organisation in the Malabar society. A land-owning family and various service castes surrounded by its geographical location defined the basic village structure in Malabar.<sup>50</sup> Within this mutually dependent village system, cultural practices such as different clothing styles for different castes<sup>51</sup>, restriction on language use<sup>52</sup> and exclusive ritual practices emphasised the social separation of castes. Such separations

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48 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:147.

49 Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871, with Appendix*, 351.

50 For an elaborated view on this village structure, see, Dilip M. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar, 1900-1948* (Cambridge, 2008).

51 There were particular dressing styles for each caste group. The men and women from Nambutiri Brahmins used to wear two clothes, one for the upper part and the other for the lower part. Logan mentions the dress of the Nayar caste as follows. “The [Nayar] women clothe themselves in a single white cloth of fine texture reaching from the waist to the knees, and occasionally, while abroad, they throw another similar cloth over the shoulders and bosom. But by custom, the Nayar women go uncovered from the waist. The [Nayar] men wear a white cloth in like fashion, and another cloth is also occasionally thrown over the shoulders.” Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:134. Thiyya women and other lower-caste women were not allowed to cover their breasts. Hafis Muhammad N. P., ‘Malabarile Jathivyavastha’, in *Malabar: Paithrukavum Prathapavum*, ed. Salim P. B., Hafis Muhammad N. P., and Vasisht M. C. (Kozhikode, 2011).

had created “a situation in which castes saw themselves as occupying distinct spaces or spheres of existence”.<sup>53</sup>

## 2.2 Conceptualising Contestation in the Pre-Modern Caste System

The information on the contestation and violence in the caste system till the eighteenth century is limited. With its economic and socio-cultural implications, the caste system discussed above was established to meet the requirements of the upper castes. Within this localised and highly dependent economy, larger solidarities were impossible for or among these endogamous oppressed castes. The higher castes perpetuated violence and oppressed the lower castes. The prevailing sense of law, obligation, morality and manners was designed in a way that defined the power and authority of the elites.<sup>54</sup>

Different social groups practised purity and pollution which ensemble the cultural logic of caste hierarchy. Some sections of society were considered not only as untouchables, but also unapproachable and unseeable. The *maryada* defined purity

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52 The restriction on language use doesn't only mean exclusive access to Sanskrit and other religious texts or literary education for the upper castes. Even in the vernacular Malayalam, there was a clear demarcation for the words upper and lower castes could use in everyday life. Logan writes: “The home itself is called by different names according to the occupants caste. The house of a Paraya is *cheri*, while the agrestic slave -the Cheruman lives in a *chala*. The blacksmith, the goldsmith, the carpenter, the weaver, etc. and the toddy drawer (Tiyān) inhabit in homes styled *pura* or *kudi*, the temple servant resides in a *variya*m or *pisharam* or *pumatham*, the ordinary Nair in a *vidu* or *bhavanam* while the man in authority of his caste dwells in an *idam*, the Raja lives in a *kovilakam*, the indigenous Brahmin (Nambutiri) in an *illam*, while his fellow of higher ranks calls his house *mana* or *manakkal*”. Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:85. This was not to denote the different styles of the house but to assert or identify the hierarchical position of each caste. For instance, a Nayar speaking to Brahmin was not allowed to use the word ‘rice’ for his ‘rice’; instead, he had to use ‘stony or gritty rice’, and his cash was not just ‘cash’ but the ‘copper cash’. Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:127.

53 Dilip M. Menon, ‘The Moral Community of the Teyyattam: Popular Culture in Late Colonial Malabar’, *Studies in History* 9, no. 2 (1993): 190, <https://doi.org/10.1177/025764309300900203>.

54 Davis, ‘Dharma, Maryada, and Law in Early British Malabar’, 68.

and pollution by the distance each caste had to keep from the Brahmins. The distance each caste has to keep from their superior caste signified the caste hierarchy. Thiyyas had to keep 16 feet from their superior caste, “Cherumas must run into a jungle on the approach of one of the superior caste, he cant come within 32 feet of the Nayar, or 64 feet of the Brahmin.” As mentioned above, the tribal caste had to keep a hundred feet distance from a Brahmin.<sup>55</sup> This purity and pollution was not only practised by Brahmins or the Nayars, but by all castes since the hierarchy existed within the larger conceptualised caste categories. While speaking of Nayadis, Buchanan mentioned that they were considered very impure and were untouchable even to the ‘slaves.’<sup>56</sup>

Capital punishment was not awarded to Brahmins or Nayars, where killing of any individual from these castes was considered the gravest sin. On the other hand, lower caste people were severely punished even for the slightest deviations from the practices. The violence operated to reinstate the caste domination. Violence in the pre-eighteenth century Malabar occurred in a way that it was sanctioned against the lower castes to reinstate the customary authority of the higher castes.

Looking at the dynamics of tenurial relationships, Ganesh argued that internal conflicts within the *janmi-kudiyan* system had started challenging customary authorities by the seventeenth century.<sup>57</sup> Since the fifteenth century, the system in Travancore and Cochin began to shatter in the context of difficulties in the rent collection. The expansion of *kuzhikanam*, where the tenant got much more power in expanding the land, their emergence as the accountants to record the details of the

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55 Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871, with Appendix*, 350–51.

56 When he used the term slave, he meant the caste like Cherumar and Parayar. Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara, and Malabar*, 2:413–14.

57 Ganesh, ‘Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala’.

rent, and the emergence of tenant households declaring their allegiance to individual *janmis*, such as *madampikur*, shows the emergence of the powerful intermediaries who continuously challenged the customary authorities. These powerful intermediaries started to infringe on the temple lands as well.<sup>58</sup> Revolts were staged against the local rulers by the intermediary tenants in the late seventeenth century. These dynamics, in turn, also forced the rulers to initiate the land settlements in Travancore and Cochin.<sup>59</sup>

However, the situation was different in Malabar. Though a large number of *kanam* tenures were provided, the spread of *kuzhikanam* was limited due to the peculiar geographical conditions, which prevented large-scale agricultural expansion. In South Malabar, where expansion of agriculture was possible, conflicts occurred not between the intermediary tenants and *janmis* but between two Brahmin factions known as Panniyur *kur* and Chovva *kur*.<sup>60</sup> The intermediary tenants could only survive this conflict by allying with the *janmis*. However, a powerful intermediary tenant did not emerge in the Malabar in the pre-eighteenth century. On the contrary,

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58 The famous Padmanabha Temple was closed down in 1674 due to the lack of resources. For details, see Ganesh, 'Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala', 314.

59 For instance, in 1674, the attempt of the Travancore princess to collect the revenue arrears and additional resources was resisted by the intermediary landholders. They mobilised an army from the Kanyakumari districts and threatened to destroy the authority. Members of the royal family, such as the chief of Nedumangad, supported this revolt. Ganesh, 'Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala', 314. Also see, A.S. Vysakh, 'Agricultural Distress, Popular Protest and Relief in Travancore (1600–1800 AD)', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 80 (2019): 461–75. In this context of the recurring threats, the Travancore rulers employed outside armies, such as the Tamil cavalry. Susan Bayly's narrative of an emerging warrior class of Syrian Christians in Travancore should be understood in this context. See, Susan Bayly, 'Hindu Kingship and the Origin of Community: Religion, State and Society in Kerala, 1750–1850', *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 2 (1984): 177–213, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00014402>.

60 Ganesh, 'Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala', 319.

the developments in the late seventeenth-century Malabar reinstated customary land relations and caste practices.<sup>61</sup>

### 2.3 Mysorean Intervention and Caste

Mysorean rule from 1766 to 1792 questioned the traditional power structures and created conflicts in the then-existing political economy. They established a power structure in the political sphere entirely different from the existing *naduvazhi* system. Each local chieftains in Malabar were defeated one by one and had to seek asylum either in the neighbouring Cochin or Travancore or in the factories of the East India Company.<sup>62</sup> The Mysorean invasion integrated Malabar into one centralised political unit by replacing the existing localised and scattered political authorities.<sup>63</sup> The construction of transport and communication networks built across Malabar facilitated the integration of local societies into the centralised political unit.<sup>64</sup>

The land settlement initiated by the Mysorean rulers radically altered the agrarian relations. The absence of the right of the ruler to the land revenue was unique to Malabar. Mysoreans tried to establish a system where the centralised ruler became the authority of the land with the right to land tax. They surveyed the land, divided it into administrative units, and fixed revenue based on the produce. The Mysorean administration made direct contact with the cultivator.<sup>65</sup> The British adopted the same method after establishing their rule. Important implication for the new land settlement was that it terminated the customary authority of the *janmis*. The Mysorean

61 Ganesh, 'Ownership and Control of Land in Medieval Kerala', 319–20.

62 K. M. Panikkar, *Kerala swathantrya samaram* (Kollam, 1957), 361–65.

63 Sreedhara Menon, *Survey of Kerala History*.

64 P.K. Balakrishnan, *Tippu Sulthan* (Kottayam, 2007), 252.

65 To elaborate on the economic and administrative reforms, see, C. K. Abdul Kareem, 'Kerala under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Aligarh Muslim University, 1968).

administrative system considered intermediary tenants, or *kanakkars*, as the proprietors of the land. Most of the Nayar *janmis* had to migrate to the neighbouring places, considering the hostility of the Mysoreans. In this context, the Nayars from the lower strata emerged as the new aristocracy in Malabar. This new aristocracy was the class base of the Nayar middle class in Kerala.<sup>66</sup>

Apart from the political and economic changes, the Mysorean rulers initiated social reforms. Tipu Sultan found the practice of *sambandham* and polyandry associated with it as an area to intervene. As per the existing clothing customs, the Nayar women and men did not cover their upper bodies. Tipu considered this practice to be immoral and uncivilised. Then he commanded to stop practising polyandry and asked the Nayars to change their dressing style, covering the upper parts. Haidar Ali had issued an order forbidding Nayars from carrying swords. As per the customary role of Nayars, they were the protectors of society, and they were entitled to carry their arms wherever they went. Denying this was a severe subversion of their authority. The same order also allowed any other castes, including the lower castes, to carry arms. It also commanded that anyone seeing a Nayar who carried the swords had to kill him.<sup>67</sup> The Mysoreans attempted to demoralise the authority and power exercised by the Nayars.

The establishment of the political authority and a new form of government by the Mysoreans had dismantled the traditional networks of authority. The land settlement and agrarian reform had also disrupted the traditional economic system. Rejecting the idea of the *janmam* right and threatening its existence, the changes

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66 Sreejith argued that, the middle class in the twentieth century Malabar emerged from the lower strata of the Nayar caste and from the upper strata of the Thiyya caste. See, Sreejith, *The Middle Class in Colonial Malabar*, 24.

67 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:416.

during this period challenged the ideological superiority of the Brahmins. *Naduvazhis* and *janmis* no longer had any material authority, politically or economically. The social interventions, especially against the Nayars, challenged their customary authority. So also the cultural basis of the caste system was challenged. They intervened in the customs of marriage, inheritance and clothing style (manners). All these in the pre-Mysorean period had cultural meanings for the caste structure. Carrying a sword was a part of the caste identity and symbolic representation of Nayar caste role. Forbidding Nayars from carrying swords had multiple implications other than cultural for the authority of Nayars. Mysoreans and the upper sections of the Nayar castes were in constant confrontation. They were organising rebellions and resistance against Mysoreans. The Mysoreans intended to isolate the Nayars, who threatened the political reign by rebelling against them.

Source of intervention in the customary practices by the Mysorean rulers, especially by Tipu, has been perceived from different perspectives. While one set of scholars argues that the religious fanaticism of the Mysorean rulers was the source of interventions, others outrightly rejected such perspective by saying that such a perspective was implanted to the historical narratives by the vested political interest of the colonial British.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, scholars agree that the Mysorean period witnessed

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68 For instance, by rejecting the attribution of the religious fanaticism to the reform attempt under the Mysorean rule, Abdul Kareem argues that such articulations were “cleverly instilled (by the British) in the minds of Hindu rulers to enlist their support”. Later studies largely depended upon these British administrative sources and the sources produced by the *janmis* and the Nayar chieftains to construct these narratives. See, Abdul Kareem, ‘Kerala under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan’, 188. Also see, Balakrishnan, *Tippu Sulthan*.

To see the argument for the religious fanaticism of Tipu, see, Mark Wilks, *Historical Sketches of the South of India In an Attempt to Trace the History of Mysoor from the Origin of the Hindoo Government of That State, to the Extinction of the Muhammeden Dynasty in 1799* (Mysore, 1810); Sreedhara Menon, *Survey of Kerala History*.

a radical change in the socio-political and economic systems of Malabar. During this period, the traditional caste system and hierarchy were disrupted. When the network of power held by Brahmins and upper-class Nayars was challenged, lower-class Nayars who were in intermediary positions emerged as a powerful group. Mysoreans perceived them as the cultivating group; they were given control over the land.

#### **2.4 The British Impact: Middle Class and the Public Sphere**

British colonial intervention brought changes in the political economy of Malabar. The spread of modern education, development of public administration and the opportunities in the colonial bureaucracy,<sup>69</sup> emergence of the concept of private ownership in land and the commercialisation of the agrarian economy,<sup>70</sup> the expansion of the transport and communication network<sup>71</sup> contributed to the consolidation of caste identities. These collectivities based on the new caste identities initiated various reforms that challenged the caste hierarchy, leading to confrontations and conflicts between castes.

For the British, understanding caste, as the person in charge of the first census of India remarked, was a lifetime's labour to elucidate.<sup>72</sup> Malabar society, as explained above was organised on the numerous socio-cultural variations that constituted

69 To understand how the role of new administrative opportunities helped the consolidation of the caste communities, see David Washbrook, 'The Development of Caste Organisation in South India 1880 to 1825', in *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change 1880-1940*, by C. J. Baker and D. A. Washbrook (London, 1975), 159–62.

70 To understand how the new cash crop cultivation and the integration to the global market changed the rural agrarian structure in colonial Malabar, see Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 21–28.

71 M. N Sreenivasan argues that the establishment of "Pax Britannica" through the extensive transport and communication network was the reason for the radical restructuring of the caste system, freeing it from the "territorial limitations" inherent in the pre-colonial political system. M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (Bombay, 1962), 16.

72 Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871, with Appendix*, 116.

themselves as *jatis*. The census report of 1871, which was done with many constraints, noted 90 castes among Hindus.<sup>73</sup> The census report of 1881 listed 977 Malayalam caste names from Malabar and Cochin.<sup>74</sup> All these caste groups were ordered hierarchically in any given geographical context. Since the beginning of the colonial understanding of India, one of the major obstacles was categorising castes. The knowledge about the local caste varieties was not 'productive' for British until it was aggregated with colonial knowledge of the India. Thus, an administrative mechanism was formulated to abstract from the local varieties.<sup>75</sup> Such administrative attempt often essentialised the idea of caste and thus caste data was often blurred in colonial India. The census of 1911 divided these numerous caste groups among Hindus of Malabar into five caste groups, with multiple sub-caste variations within each group.<sup>76</sup> This census clubbed nineteen caste variations into the category of 'Malayali' Brahmins. Similarly, 412 castes were clubbed into the Nayar caste, 640 variations to Thiyyas and 255 to Cherumas.<sup>77</sup> New epistemological domains which developed with colonial governmentality changed the "spatio-temporal world of objects" and the collective consciousness.<sup>78</sup> The social organisation of caste also began to change similarly. Hence, by the turn of the century, caste structure in Malabar was perceived

73 Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871, with Appendix*, 349.

74 Two administrative unites from Cochin, categorised as Cochin *taluk* and Cochin municipality were included among the other 14 from Malabar. Lewis McIver, *Imperial Census of 1881 Operations and Results in the Presidency of Malabar* (Madras, 1883), 4:339–57.

75 Kevin Walby and Michael Haan, 'Caste Confusion and Census Enumeration in Colonial India, 1871–1921', *Histoire Sociale / Social History* 45, no. 90 (2012): 311, <https://doi.org/10.1353/his.2012.0026>.

76 J. Charters Molony, *Census of India, 1911*, Volume XII, Madras, Part 1 (Madras, 1912), 162.

77 Molony, *Census of India, 1911*, 185.

78 U. Kalpagam, 'The Colonial State and Statistical Knowledge', *History of the Human Sciences* 13, no. 2 (2000): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09526950022120665>.

not only by the colonial state but also by the natives in the following order: Brahmins, Nayars, intermediary castes, the depressed castes, and tribals. Thiyyas, and many other service castes were included in the intermediary castes. Depressed castes is the word used for *dalit* castes.

Within these novel and essentialised caste categories, a middle class emerged with new vocabularies and socio-political projects. The concept of a 'middle class' in India is much debated. This debate goes back to the colonial period whence by the end of the nineteenth century the emerging Indian nationalists like Surendranath Banarjee began to claim themselves as a section belonging to a new middle class.<sup>79</sup> Colonial scholars reacted that the said class was not like the western middle class or they were not at all "westernised" and thus represents only a "microscopic minority" from the elite castes in India.<sup>80</sup> In the post-independence academic discourses, we see broadly three different stands on this debate. One set of scholars uses the middle class category in their works extensively as a well-articulated and self-evident sociological category in colonial India.<sup>81</sup> The next set of scholars who expressed their affiliation to the Cambridge historiography argues that there was no such well-articulated middle class in colonial India because of the peculiar characteristics of the Indian society and the nature of colonialism. They figured the new emerging class either as "middle men" between British administrators and Indian elites with local influence<sup>82</sup> or as the "traditional intellectuals" in the Gramscian sense, who always attempt to establish

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79 Michelguglielmo Torri, "'Westernised Middle Class', Intellectuals and Society in Late Colonial India', *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 4 (1990): 2.

80 Torri, "'Westernised Middle Class', Intellectuals and Society in Late Colonial India', 2.

81 For instance see, B. B. Misra, *The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times* (Delhi, 1961).

82 David Washbrook, 'Gandhian Politics', *Modern Asian Studies* 7, no. 1 (1973): 110.

themselves as an autonomous, independent class, while in reality they were not.<sup>83</sup> The other set of scholars with a subaltern and post-colonial theoretical orientation pointed out that the Indian middle class emerged as a result of colonial modernity, which was very different from that of the West and argued that they were both the products and producers of that “fractured modernity”.<sup>84</sup> However, it would be better to treat the middle class as a project by a new section, of defining their distinction from other social groups through their activities in the public sphere.<sup>85</sup>

At the same time, scholars have argued that the middle class in colonial India was not homogeneous.<sup>86</sup> It not only represented different layers but also functioned as different compartments. Sarkar, while locating the Bengali middle class in colonial India, had argued that they cannot be characterised by their association with capitalistic enterprises, but by new English education, “predominantly high -caste Hindu status and a virtually ubiquitous link with land in the form of petty *zaminadari*, or more often, intermediate tenure holding.”<sup>87</sup> This was also the same for the Malabar, except for the emergence of the Thiyya middle class, who were in the lower section of the caste hierarchy. Formation of the middle classes in Malabar was not a homogeneous process.<sup>88</sup> The new middle classes emerged from various communities through different and divergent processes. In other words, the middle classes from

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83 Torri, “‘Westernised Middle Class’, Intellectuals and Society in Late Colonial India’, 7.

84 Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (New Delhi, 2001), 2. Also see, Partha Chatterjee, ‘The Subalternity of a Nationalist Elite’, in *The Middle Class in Colonial India*, ed. Sanjay Joshi (Oxford, 2010).

85 Joshi, *Fractured Modernity*, 172.

86 Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi, 1997), viii.

87 Sumit Sarkar, ‘The City Imagined: Calcutta of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’, in *Writing Social History*, by Sumit Sarkar (Delhi, 1997), 178.

88 Sreejith, *The Middle Class in Colonial Malabar*, 163.

different communities emerged through multiple but distinctive processes over different spans of time and space. The way in which the Nayar middle class emerged and constituted itself was different from the way in which the Christian or even the Thiyya middle class emerged in Kerala. Multiple factors, identical and divergent, influenced each of these processes.

The nature of the nascent caste collectivities and the middle class defines the constitution of the public sphere in colonial Malabar. The historians of colonial India argued against the predominant idea of the public sphere as an inclusive common space accessible to everyone. The public sphere in colonial India was ‘deeply segmented,’ and it was through the communities that the individuals were forced to appear as the public.<sup>89</sup> The colonial government wanted to collect public opinion to act upon social issues. In a context where the individuals were grouped into caste communities and the middle class was formed along caste lines, caste communities came to the public sphere to raise the concerns of the communities. Individual interests superseded community interests that were articulated as the public interest or the common good. Different publics appeared in the public sphere. The sections from the lower castes, who could appropriate the possibilities of the public sphere, tried to forge resistance against both colonial powers and hegemonic caste groups.<sup>90</sup> However, the idea of the community in the public sphere was not static. Different sensibilities,

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89 Neeladri Bhattacharya, ‘Notes towards a Conception of the Colonial Public’, in *Civil Society, Public Sphere, and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava, Helmut Reifeld, and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (New Delhi, 2005), 153–56.

90 Salah Punathil, ‘Kerala Muslims And Shifting Notions Of Religion In The Public Sphere’, *South Asia Research* 33, no. 1 (2013): 3.

such as caste, religion, and class, constantly reconfigured the idea of the public in the nineteenth and twentieth-century Malabar.<sup>91</sup>

## 2.5 The Nayar Caste Reform Movement

The Nayars were the first caste group to consolidate and restructure their social position. Contestation by the Nayars started in the peculiar context where the traditional nexus of caste powers started shattering in the late eighteenth century with the Mysorean invasion. New political developments during the Mysorean regime and reforms in the land revenue system had threatened the *janmis*, mostly Brahmins, who migrated to neighbouring territories. In this new context, a new aristocracy emerged in Malabar from the intermediary tenants (*kanakkars*) who became the new *janmis*. These intermediary tenants were mainly from the Nayar caste.

When the British established their political power in Malabar after the treaty of Srirangapatnam, they started reinstating the old *janmis*.<sup>92</sup> The coming back of the *janmis* and reinstatement of their old powers was contentious in the new context. The colonial misconception of *janmam* as the absolute land ownership further complicated this situation.<sup>93</sup> The new aristocracy, those who had enjoyed rights on the land for at least a quarter of the century, was not ready to give up their fortunes. In this confrontation, the Brahmin and Nayar castes had consolidated in opposition. The social reform movements and the tenancy agitations by the Nayar middle class emerged from the material background of these contestations. They have appropriated

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91 Babu C.T. Sunil, 'The Making of the Malayalee Public Sphere and the Exclusion of Mappila Women: Language and Communal Politics in Colonial Malabar', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 56, no. 2 (2022): 146, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00699667221132585>.

92 This was the commitment made by the British to these groups for their help in the fight against Tipu.

93 In the early eighteenth century Malabar, *janmam* is considered the 'life interest on the soil' since the word '*janmam*' literally means so. Moreover, the *janmam* rights were never held hereditary. Kunhi Krishnan, *Tenancy Legislation in Malabar*, 5.

the administrative opportunities of the British government. It was noted that the middle class in Malabar was formed from these *kanakkars* who “monopolised almost all positions in the service sector”.<sup>94</sup>

The caste reform movements to abolish *sambandham*<sup>95</sup> and polyandry, were aimed at challenging the social subordination of Nayers to Nambutiris. As per the traditional caste system, only the elder male member of a Nambutiri family could have a legal marriage and live with his wife in the *Illom* (Nambutiri household). All other male members of the Nambutiri families had to have an informal relationship with the women of the caste below them. It was in this context a peculiar cohabitation started between Nambutiri men and Nayar women.<sup>96</sup> The Nayar reformers understood *sambandham* as favouring the Nambutiri family system and disadvantaged Nayers, marking them inferior to Nambutiris. While introducing the Malabar Marriage Bill in

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94 K. N. Panikkar, ‘Agrarian Legislation and Social Classes: A Case Study of Malabar’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 13, no. 21 (1978): 881.

95 *Sambandham* was a unique form of marriage/union that existed in Kerala exclusively among the Nayar community. According to this custom, women of the Nayar families could have unions with any men of their community or a community higher than her’s in the caste system. These unions could start or end at any time at will, without any rituals or customary proceedings. A woman could have any number of such relations at the same time. The children from such unions would belong to the household of the women and were legal heirs of the properties of that household. In South Malabar, Nayar women entered relationships with Nambutiri men and lived in their own taravads (household). In northern Malabar, where the Nambutiris were fewer, Nayar women married men from their sub-caste and lived in the husband’s household. Polyandry was recognised in South Malabar as part of the *marumakkathayam*. However, it was not unique that in some parts of Northern Malabar, polyandry was forbidden.

96 The origin of matriliney and its related customary practices is still a topic of debate. There are many influential theories on the origin of this system. One of them views this system as a product of unequal marriage relations between the Nambutiri Brahman and the Nayar community, which emerged out of the material and ideological superiority of the Nambutiris. See, Panikkar K. N, ‘Land Control, Ideology and Reform: A Study of the Changes in Family Organization and Marriage System in Kerala’, *The Indian Historical Review* 4, no. 1 (1997). Another set of scholars argued that Marumakkathayam evolved from the conditions of constant war between the Chola and Chera dynasties, which led to the absence of Nayar men from their households as they were part of the local militia. For instance, see, Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847 - 1908* (New Delhi, 1976).

the Madras legislative council, C. Sankara Nayar said: “Our wives are concubines and our children bastards in the court of law, and the necessity therefore is a bill to legalise marriage”.<sup>97</sup> Hence, the movement to legalise *sambandham* was also a fight against the Nambutiri superiority.

The Nayar reformers formed the Malabar Marriage Association in 1879 to radically alter the marriage practices. Malabar Marriage Bill was drafted by this association and introduced in the Madras Legislative Council on March 24, 1890. This bill aimed to legalise the Nayar marriages by registering *sambandham* and to make bigamy a punishable offence.<sup>98</sup> This bill also contained many other provisions, such as making the husband responsible for the wife and children, fixing the minimum age for marriage for men and girls, and legalising divorce. The Malabar Marriage Commission, constituted by the Madras Government, found considerable opposition from the ‘Nambutiri landlords, head of taravads and even from a section of the educated Nayars and a few women.’ The commission submitted a report stating that the “proposed legislation is not at present desired by a majority.”<sup>99</sup> Then, a modified version of the bill, which provided that the registered *sambandham* would have legal marriage status, was passed as the Madras Act IV of 1896 or the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896.

Another important intervention by the Nayar middle class was the tenancy agitation that started in the early decades of twentieth century. The reformers demand permanent occupancy rights for intermediary tenants who held tenures for

97 Quoted in K. N, ‘Land Control, Ideology and Reform: A Study of the Changes in Family Organization and Marriage System in Kerala’, 44.

98 Susan Thomas, ‘Property Relations and Family Forms in Colonial Keralam’ (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Mahatma Gandhi University, 2002), 131.

99 Malabar Marriage Commission Reports, para 59, p. 34. Quoted in Thomas, ‘Property Relations and Family Forms in Colonial Keralam’, 134.

25 years. This movement carried a direct economic interest of the Nayar caste against the Nambutiri *janmis* and old Nayar aristocracy. The demands were addressed to the government and presented in the legislative council as a tenancy bill in 1922 introduced by M. Krishnan Nayar. Even after it was passed in the council on September 2, 1926 the government did not assent the bill. This spurred protest meetings in different parts of Malabar from November 25, 1926.<sup>100</sup> Then, in 1927, a tenancy committee was appointed by the government. Since all the committee members were landlords, there was mounting pressure against the committee. After considerable discussion and deliberation, and in the context of the Nayar middle class's gradual domination of the reform discourse, the tenancy bill was reintroduced, and the Malabar Tenancy Act was passed in the Madras Legislative Council in October 1929. The governor assented to the bill on March 28, 1930.

In the case of tenancy legislation, discussion on the tenancy question was started in the colonial administrative sphere in the mid-nineteenth century to consider the sufferings of cultivating tenants. But by the early twentieth century, it was successfully hijacked by the interests of the intermediary tenants, being the leaders from the Nayar caste being the vanguards.<sup>101</sup> However, the significant presence of a Thiyya middle class and the national movement in the second decades of the twentieth century forced the reformers to include the interests of cultivating tenants as well.

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100 Irfan Habeeb R. T., 'Colonial Legislation and Social Change in Kerala: Making of Madras Marumakkathayam Act, 1932' (Unpublished M.Phil. Thesis, University of Hyderabad, 2015), 22.

101 Scholars like K.N. Panikkar argues that this tenancy movement was 'primarily an expression of the intermediary *kanakkar* against *janmis*'. Though the eviction and other exploitative actions affected the *verumpattakkar* and small *kanakkar* they hardly had the "power or resources to take advantage of the legal safeguard". See, Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 120–21.

The reforms of the Nayar matrilineal system, called *marumakkathayam*, and the joint family institutions were another important initiative by the middle class Nayars. The marriage reform they had demanded for four decades was realised through this legislation. *Marumakkathayam* was articulated as the backbone of all the ‘evil practices’ that forced the Nayar caste into social inferiority and economic stagnation.<sup>102</sup> The making of this legislation ensured the caste interest of the Nayars against the Nambutiris and the castes lower than them. For instance, this proposed bill included a provision to legalise union between Nayar women and men from other castes. However, the condition was that it should be as per ‘the social usage,’ which meant only unions with upper caste men, that is, only men from the Nambutiri caste. While ensuring *sambandham* to be legally valid, it successfully discarded any sanction to the union between Nayar women and lower caste men. The amendment to remove this clause was vehemently opposed by Nayar reformers in the council, but was voted and carried.<sup>103</sup> Most of the Nayar members from Malabar defended the clause by saying it was in the community’s interest and voted against the amendment.<sup>104</sup>

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102 The reformers of the Nayar *marumakkathayam*, who were also the nationalist leaders of the Malabar, articulated that the Western interferences in the customary practices for more than a hundred years had made the system incorporate all the evils, which made the community inferior and stagnant. For instance, K. P Raman Menon wrote that the *marumakkathayam* would have disappeared long ago if the “rigid enforcement of the system by the British court” were absent. Letter, K.P. Raman Menon to the Secretary to the State of Madras, Legislative Department dated December 19, 1929. Madras Records, Law (General) Department (1929-1930), G.O. No. 363, Serial Number. 8, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

103 The amendment was moved by VT Arasu to remove the words “with whom the conjugal union was permitted by the social usage” from the clause. *Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council*, Vol. LXIII, No. 3: 341, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

104 For instance, Krishnan Nayar argued that when legislation is brought for a particular community, then it should be guided by the sense of the larger majority of that community. *Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council*, Vol. LXIII, No. 3: 345, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Another provision of the bill provided that when a non-*marumakkathayee* man dies intestate, leaving descendants in both the *marumakkathayam* community and his own community, the properties of the male should be equally divided, and one-half should be given to the *marumakkathayam* community.<sup>105</sup> An amendment was moved to substitute this ‘one-half’ with ‘one-fourth.’<sup>106</sup> This provision placed Nayar women in a better position than Nambutiri women. When a Nambutiri has more than one wife in his community and one Nayar wife, one-half of the property would go to his Nayar wife, and all other Nambutiri wives together would get the other half. The amendment was voted and defeated in the council. In many such ways, the act as it was formed through the legislative institution largely incorporated the social and economic interests of the Nayar caste against the caste above and below them.

The Nayar caste movement contested the economic and cultural superiority of Nambutiri Brahmins, the only caste higher than them in the traditional caste hierarchy. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that it was the sole motive and objective of Nayar reform. They were informed by a new notion of social and familial morality in the ideological sphere which equipped them in their domination of the public sphere and legal institutions.<sup>107</sup> The hegemony of Nayar middle class in the public sphere, and their political visibility and the significant majority in the legislative council, made the colonial administration align with the Nayar reformers by the

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To see elaborated debate details, see R. T., ‘Colonial Legislation and Social Change in Kerala: Making of Madras Marumakkathayam Act, 1932’, 92–98.

105 Bill as drafted by the Select Committee forwarded to the Government of India, Government of Madras, Law (General) Department MS Series(1931-1932), Report of the Select Committee, G.O. 349-350, Serial Number 68, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

106 *Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council*, Vol. LXIII, No. 3: 368, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

107 R. T., ‘Colonial Legislation and Social Change in Kerala: Making of Madras Marumakkathayam Act, 1932’, 33.

1930s. A transformation in the attitude of the colonial government made the various socio-economic legislations possible in the exact desired form for the Nayar middle class. Precisely because of its moderate approach in challenging the basic caste practices and with of the state on their side, their caste assertion did not create any physical conflict with the upper caste.

## **2.6 Ezhava/Thiyya Castes Identity and Violence: Kalpathy Incidents**

It was the Ezhavas/Thiyyas and dalits who initiated the anti-caste movements against untouchability and caste restrictions. The anti-caste movements in Malabar were distinctive from those in other parts of Kerala. The activities of caste associations were comparatively fewer than those of the princely states of Travancore and Cochin.<sup>108</sup> The influence and impact of the Ezhava reformers, like Sree Narayana Guru, Chattambi Swamikal, etc, who advocated for the ‘spiritual revitalisation for the advancement of the society’, was significantly less in the Malabar region.<sup>109</sup> Though Malabar had around 25 percent of Thiyya population, the *Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam* had only 138 members out of a 1299 total membership. This nominal membership has to be understood in light of the fact that the percentage of the Thiyya population in Travancore and Cochin was 15.9 percent and 22.7 percent respectively.<sup>110</sup> As Dilip Menon argues, “the idea of wider community of equals

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108 P Chandra Mohan, ‘Growth of Social Reform Movements in Kerala’, in *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium*, ed. P. J. Cherian (Thiruvananthapuram, 1999), 2:432.

109 Chandra Mohan, ‘Growth of Social Reform Movements in Kerala’, 459.

110 Population data from the Census of India, 1911, cited in Toshie Awaya, ‘Some Aspects of the Thiyyas’ “Caste” Movement with Special Reference to British Malabar’, in *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*, Paperback edition, ed. Hiroyuki Kotani, Japanese Studies on South Asia, no. 1 (New Delhi, 1999), 140–41.

Hindus sans caste” could be the reason for the very localised development of the Thiyya movement in Malabar.<sup>111</sup>

A Thiyya middle class had emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. Obtaining the new education from the schools established by the Basel Evangelical Mission,<sup>112</sup> and appropriating the opportunities at the colonial bureaucracy, Thiyyas emerged as a significant group with considerable power in administration. In fact, the Thiyya middle class emerged from the families of the Thiyyas who made their economic fortune during the early decades of the British intervention. By the second half of the nineteenth century, as the census report stated: “Many Thiyyas are in public service or trade or cultivate the land. Most of the servants employed by the Europeans are drawn from this class.”<sup>113</sup> Using the surplus from the cash-crop agrarian economy, some Thiyyas also engaged in commerce and started factories by the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>114</sup>

The traditional caste system and untouchability were not in tandem with the political and economic mobility among the Thiyya caste. They initiated the anti-caste reform movements against untouchability and other caste restrictions. Apart from these, they demanded communal representation and established community temples. The broadening of the scope of the tenancy reform, providing permanent occupancy to the cultivating tenants, was the result of the significant influence of the Thiyyas in

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111 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 6.

112 Basel Evangelical Mission started their schools in Malabar in 1834. Thiyyas were their primary target group for their civilising mission.

113 Cornish, *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871, with Appendix*, 350.

114 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 6.

the public sphere.<sup>115</sup> These attempts had created contention with the upper castes in general and the Nayar caste in particular.

The attempt by the Ezhavas of Palakkad to assert their right to walk through the public road in Kalpathy and the violent clashes that followed are well-known incidents in twentieth-century Malabar. Kalpathy *agraharam* was the street covered by the houses of Pattar Brahmins on both sides of the street.<sup>116</sup> Untouchable castes were restricted from entering the *agraharam*, and at Kalpathy, they were not allowed to pass through the street.

On September 26, 1924, the Madras Government issued an order stating that any depressed class person could travel along any public roads or street in any part of the presidency.<sup>117</sup> This government order received wide publicity through newspapers and other channels. Ezhavas of the Palakkad found this an opportunity to cross the barriers of their social subordination and decided to enter Kalpathy Street rightfully. They informed the municipal officials that they wished to watch the upcoming Kalpathy car festival on November 13, 1924.<sup>118</sup> Officials supported their attempt and

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115 Awaya, 'Some Aspects of the Tiyyas' "Caste" Movement with Special Reference to British Malabar', 149.

116 *Agraharam* generally refers to the settlement or the village of *Brahmins*. Pattars are the Tamil *Brahmins* who migrated to Kerala and settled across the Neela or Kalpathy River. They were considered inferior to the *Nambutiri Brahmins*. Kalpathy village was a parallel row of houses with a road in the middle. For more details of eighteenth-century Kalpathy *agraharams*, see Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara, and Malabar*, 2:352.

117 G.O. No. 2660 L&M, Government of Madras, September 26, 1924, quoted in Anish K.K., 'Conceptions of Community, Nation and Politics: The Ezhavas of South Malabar, India and Their Quest for Equality', *CASTE / A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* 3, no. 1 (2022): 78.

118 The car festival of Kalpathy Siva temple was one of the annual festivals celebrated in November in Kalpathy village, which usually attracts larger crowds from neighbouring parts.

assured them that a specific place would be allocated to Ezhavas to observe the festival.

On the evening of November 13, 1924, about 80 Ezhavas arrived in groups and observed the festival. While returning, they were blocked and attacked by the Brahmins. Brahmins used sticks and stones against the Ezhavas, and they were severely injured. There was no counterattack from the Ezhavas. Police were at the scene, and they did not intervene. After the incident, police prohibited the gathering of Ezhavas under Section 144.

The next violent incident at Kalpathy happened on October 31, 1925. On that day, 12 Ezhavas walked through Kalpathy Street. One of the Arya Samaj leaders, Brahmachari Vedhabanu, was also with them. Around 200 Brahmins gathered to obstruct them and started pelting stones and hitting Ezhavas with sticks. At this time, there was a counterattack from the Ezhavas. Complaints from the Ezhavas stated that “the Brahmins began to beat and pelt stones at them. They were all in about one hundred to two hundred. We received several blows. PC Gopalan was wounded. We were driven as far as Kesava Pillais’s shop.”<sup>119</sup>

The statement in a complaint by Sundareswara Srourthigal, a Brahmin youth of the Kalpathy village, dated October 31 1925 is as follows.

At 4 or 4.30 pm thirteen persons went from west to east in a body. A bearded man asked us why they should not enter. A melee ensued. They took their umbrellas and began to beat us. We also did likewise. The bearded man struck me with a knife on the nose and on the right eyebrow. I got two small injuries. Boys began to throw stones at them. They also

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119 Quoted by the law member C. P. Ramaswami Ayyar at the Madras Legislative Council on December 14, 1925. *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Government of Madras, Forth Session of the Second Legislative Council Under the Government of India Act, XXVI (1) (1925), 50, RAK.*

began to throw stones at us. Viswanatha Ayyar was then wounded. I did not see him being stabbed, nor do I know who stabbed him.<sup>120</sup>

The Kalpathy incident is considered one of the landmarks in the anti-caste movement and a “carefully orchestrated” attempt by the lower castes to challenge untouchability.<sup>121</sup> In November 1924, 80 Ezhavas were attacked, and there was no attempt to defend or counterattack. The violence by the hegemonic caste group was unopposed, and the lower castes accepted it without much protest. Those Thiyyas who were attacked were lawyers, magistrates, district board members and wealthy individuals.<sup>122</sup> However, one year later, the Ezhavas decided to enter in to the Kalpathy street again. In that year, when Brahmins initiated the violence again, there was decisive resistance and counterattack by the Ezhavas. There was a new development in the consciousness of Ezhavas of Palakkad during that year.

In 1924, the educated Ezhavas, well-placed in the British administration, expected the British state to protect them. The Ezhavas who got attacked and wounded did not even file a police complaint against the attackers. However, the colonial state did not support or protect the rights of the Ezhavas in 1924. The assertion of their rights by the Ezhavas was considered unworthy of protection.<sup>123</sup> The colonial administration was not ambiguous in protecting the rights of Brahmins by restricting the Ezhavas and untouchables. In fact, the representative of the government, the then law member, Arthur Knapp appreciated the patience of Ezhavas

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120 Quoted by the Law Member on December 14, 1925. *Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, XXVI (1), 50–51.

121 Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, 233.

122 K.K., ‘Conceptions of Community, Nation and Politics’, 78.

123 Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, 235.

for not complaining against Brahmins for the physical assault.<sup>124</sup> He turned down any discussion on this matter and refused to lay the report of the incident on the table.<sup>125</sup> He stated: “In this matter, it is desirable for the government not to aggravate rather to mitigate as much as they can feeling on both sides.”<sup>126</sup> The Government of Madras was ambivalent in this matter when they said that “the public has a right of access and use in respect of all highways, but it is not for them finally to decide whether a particular street or road falls in the classification.”<sup>127</sup> The government’s position was that they were not the most competent authority to decide this matter. If any concerned party had to enter the street, they had to establish that right through judicial proceedings.<sup>128</sup> Subsequently, two judicial proceedings were initiated by the Ezhavas regarding their entry to the street.<sup>129</sup>

In February 1925, legislative council member R Veerian asked that whether the government was aware that the depressed classes were not even allowed to buy

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124 He said in Legislative Council on February 6, 1925 that” if any person has been assaulted, it is quite open for him to lodge a complaint. I imagine that the fact is that the good sense of the persons concerned has prevented them from going to court.” *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Government of Madras, Third Session of the Second Legislative Council Under the Government of India Act.*, XXII (1) (1925), 13, RAK.

125 A question even about a primary school situated in a building in the Kalpathy *agraharam*, which had no access to the depressed classes, was also not addressed in the council. *Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, XXII (1), 283–84.

126 *Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, XXII (1), 12.

127 An extract from a government order passed after receiving a memorial from the Brahmins of Kalpathy *agraharams* requesting that no access should be given to Thiyyas, Ezhavas, Paraiyas, Nayatdis etc. on their streets as the distance approach of these classes of people would pollute them, their streets, dwellings, tanks and temples. Quoted in the Legislative council on February 6, 1925 by R Srinivasan, a Legislative Council member, *Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, XXII (1), 352.

128 Discussion on Madras Legislative Council on February 6, 1925, *Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, XXII (1), 351–54.

129 Law member C.P. Ramaswami Ayyar in the Madras Legislative Council on December 14, 1925. *Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, XXVI (1), 49.

things from the public market but were made to stand at a great distance and “howl like jackals for the things they want”. The response from the law member C.P. Ramaswami Ayyar was as follows.

I do not think the government has ever compelled anybody to howl like a jackal nor is the government in a position to prevent that except to this extent, that if they assert their rights and if there is any difficulty government may well be called upon to defend their position.<sup>130</sup>

Hence, it was clear to the Ezhavas of Palakkad that the government would not be with them until they asserted their rights and fought for themselves. It was with this conviction that the Ezhavas approached and threatened the Arya Samaj with conversion to Islam. There were a militant Hindu Mahasabha at Palakkad insisting on self-defence training since the Malabar rebellion and an active Arya Samaj vehemently working against the religious conversion from the Hindu untouchables. “The demonstration of the Malabar Ezhavas ... threatens mass conversion alerted the Arya Samajists and Hindu Mahasabha.”<sup>131</sup> Professionally and economically advancing Ezhavas wanted to eradicate their social subordination, and they wanted to counter physical caste violence from the upper castes. They reached out to the militant religious groups. On the other hand, Hindu Mahasabha and Arya Samaj wanted to show conviction and militancy to keep the untouchables in their fold. The violent incident in October 1925 was an outcome of such interests.

The violent incident at Kalpathy in 1925 occurred just thirteen days before that year’s car festival, which was scheduled for November 13 to 16. On November 4,

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130 G.O. No. 175. Public Department, Miscellaneous Series, 26 February 1926. Bundle Number 8, Serial Number 39, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

131 Natarajan K, ‘The Lot of Untouchable Converts’, *Indian Social Reformer*, 26 September 1925.

1925, the Brahmins of Kalpathy objected to the entry of the Arya Samajists into Kalpathy. They alleged that the active propoganda of Arya Samaj in Palakkad and the neighbourhood for the conversion of the polluting castes was done “mainly with a view to circumventing the objection to the use of the *agraharam* roads.”<sup>132</sup> Then, on November 6, the district magistrate, Mr Thorne and the sub divisional magistrate, Mr Kunhiraman Nayar, had a discussion with the Brahmins of Kalpathy and the Arya Samajists. The primary demand of the Brahmins was that, in light of this violent incident, the government should prevent the entry of untouchables into Kalpathy during the car festival. In this meeting, a tentative agreement was reached that the Ezhavas would not attempt to enter the *agraharam* during the car festival. They also came to an understanding that the Ezhava converts might be allowed to pass through the Brahmins street without any demonstrations and in small numbers.<sup>133</sup> Ezhavas was not part of this meeting, but the leaders of Arya Samaj spoke for them. Arya Samaj also wanted to adequately address the concerns of the Brahmins.

On November 8, Arya Samaj leaders assured that they would use their influence to dissuade their followers from “attempting an entry during the car festival because the feelings were running high, and a breach of peace might be apprehended.” On November 10, Arya Samaj leaders told the sub divisional magistrate that they would instruct their followers not to attempt an entry. The next day, on the 11th, “Pandit Rishi Ram, the local Arya Samajist missionary, went to the sub divisional magistrate and practically asked for an order under section 144.”<sup>134</sup> A

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132 *Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, XXVI (1), 50.

133 *Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, XXVI (1), 53.

134 *Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, XXVI (1), 51.

close look at these proceedings explicitly illustrates that the Ezhavas of Palakkad were not in control of their upper caste leaders of Arya Samaj.

Meanwhile, something else was happening. A local Muslim community called Rowthers was inclined to range themselves on the side of the Brahmins. “A local Muhammadan society issued a printed notice warning Ezhavas against joining the Arya Samaj.”<sup>135</sup> An article from the *Justice* newspaper on November 17, 1925, was quoted by the law member in the Madras Legislative Council: “Add to this the well-known fact that it is on the Mappilas -that is, however, incorrect for they were Rowthers- that the Kalpathy Brahmins had relied on manpower to resist the entry of Arya Samajist and the untouchables into their village and therefore you have a situation fraught with possibilities of immense mischief looming up in the horizon.”<sup>136</sup> The entry of the Muslims into the picture instigated the Arya Samajists again, and the sub divisional magistrate noted that the Samajist leaders intended to go back on the assurance previously given and enter the street. “The Brahmins to get the help of other people to resist the entry and partially to the resiling of the Arya Samajists from their agreement,” Law Member observed in the council.<sup>137</sup>

For Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha, the militancy on the issue of untouchability was tactical; it was used to mobilise the untouchables, though conveniently set it aside when the caste hegemony demanded, and restored to when in opposition with the religious other. However, the militancy asserted by the Ezhavas was political, and they used the strength of organisations like the Hindu Mahasabha

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135 Law member C.P. Ramaswami Ayyar in Madras Legislative Council on December 14, 1925. *Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, XXVI (1), 51.

136 *Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, XXVI (1), 51.

137 *Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, XXVI (1), 51–51.

and the Arya Samaj. The Kalpathy incident established a model of subaltern counter-violence against the longstanding upper-caste violence.

## **2.7 Ezhava/Thiyya Caste Identity and Everyday Violence**

The organised efforts at Kalpathy were not some isolated events. The transformation of Thiyyas/Ezhavas from subjugated inferior caste groups to an equal social being accompanied by violence. They were subjected to violence, and there were instances of assertive counter-violence throughout Malabar in their individual day-to-day lives. Such everyday episodes of violence must be placed in the changing dynamics of the social ties and structures. The violence instigated by Thiyyas/Ezhavas as a result of their assertion was one of the dynamics of twentieth-century caste violence in Malabar.

The incident that happened at the Kuzhalmannam, a place at Palakkad, in 1923 was an example of such assertive counter-violence. One Mr. Kandunni, a young Ezhava, stabbed and killed one Vatheri Ravunni Nayar. He also stabbed three other people who tried to stop him. The incident is as follows. March 30, 1923, was the last day of the ritual performance at Kuzhalmanna temple. There were separate sitting rooms for Brahmins and Nayars within the precincts, and Ezhavas had to sit outside. Usually, Ezhava men would sit on a platform around a tree called *tara*. This platform had collapsed, and Kandunni had to sit on the ground with ladies, which created a disturbance among the crowd. At this moment, three Nayars, including the deceased, went to the scene and asked Kandunni not to create any disturbance. The response of the Kandunni to them was that they should be careful with him because he was armed.

Then a fight broke out in which Kandunni stabbed and Killed Ravunni Nayar. Kandunni also stabbed others who came to intervene.<sup>138</sup>

When this case came up in South Malabar sessions court, the court observed that the reason for the quarrel by the prosecution was silly. The sessions judge G. H. B Jackson Esquire observed that “I am quite certain that the women were not ingeminating ‘Ayyo’ (crying) merely because a young man was sitting too close to them, no would Ravunni Nayar have polluted himself by crossing over to Ezhava’s seat it was a simple quarrel of this kind.”<sup>139</sup> The sessions court observed that the accused was beaten up so badly and he was exercising his right to self-defence and hence acquitted him from all major charges except charges of grievous hurt. The court sentenced him to just one year of imprisonment.<sup>140</sup>

Another incident of the similar nature happened at Kunnamangalam near Kozhikode in 1932. A young Thiyya, Mullambalath Kanaran, aged 22, murdered one Emman Nayar. As the prosecution presented at the court, the incident is as follows. On February 3, 1932, at about 8 pm, the deceased and his friend Unnaran Nayar went to the nearby river to bathe. The deceased wanted to meet another person after the

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138 There were two sides to this story. According to the Ezhava witnesses, there was a further quarrel. When Kandunni stabbed Ravunni, three Ezhavas, Kuppelan, Ittan, and Raman, approached him, intending to stop him. Among them, Kuppelan, who approached first, was stabbed, and then the Ittan was cut. Raman could take the knife away from him. Ravunni Nayar made a statement before he died. As per his statement, he intervened in a group fight among Ezhavas, and Kandunni stabbed him. Session case No. 30 of 1923 in the Court of session of the South Malabar division dated August 7, 1923. Sessions Judgements of South Malabar, 1923, Malabar Collectorate Files, No. 666, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

139 Session case No. 30 of 1923 in the Court of session of the South Malabar division dated August 7, 1923. Sessions Judgements of South Malabar, 1923, Malabar Collectorate Files, No. 666, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

140 Session case No. 30 of 1923 in the Court of session of the South Malabar division dated August 7, 1923. Sessions Judgements of South Malabar, 1923, Malabar Collectorate Files, No. 666, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

bath and Unnaran Nayar also accompanied him. On the way, they met Kanaran, and Unnaran Nayar called out and asked him who it was. Kanaran replied with his name. Then Nayar told him not to come near them since they did not want to get polluted. To which Kanaran replied: “The *sirkar* (government) road belongs to all. I won’t go out of my way. If you wish to avoid pollution you can keep at a distance from me.” Then both Nayars went to the road’s eastern edge and walked along passing Kanaran. As they passed, the deceased said to the Kanaran: “We shall speak about this tomorrow.” Kanaran reacted, “Why postpone it till tomorrow, why not have it even today?” to Emman Nayar, after which Kanaran crossed the road and cut him curiously with the bill hook which he was carrying. Emman Nayar died soon after.<sup>141</sup>

The South Malabar sessions court and the Madras high court made an observation that is interesting for our study.<sup>142</sup> Both courts said that the conversation produced by the prosecution is not adequate to create a spontaneous outrage by the accused, and there might be more provocations that might explain the sudden outrage of the accused. Thiyyas of the locality were emerging as assertive individuals who were ready to stand up against caste oppression and their social subordination. Emman Nayar belonged to the caste group of Pulaya Nayar, a sub-caste of Nayar, and was considered inferior to the regular Nayar. The sub-inspector of the locality noted in the court that the Pulaya Nayars of this village were persons of disorderly character, and the deceased himself was the leader of that group. There was animosity among

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141 Prosecution witness Unnaran Nayar in the court of session of the south Malabar division. Sessions case number 19 of 1932 dated April 26, 1932. Sessions Judgement of South Malabar 1932, Malabar Collectorate Files, No. 669, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

142 The accused had gone for an appeal in the high court of Madras and was considered by the court as criminal appeal no.286 of 1932, dated July 11, 1932, Sessions Judgement of South Malabar 1932, Malabar Collectorate Files, No. 669, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

the Thiyyas and Pulaya Nayars of the locality. The beginning of this enmity was the refusal of the Thiyyas to offer customary prerequisites and gifts on ceremonial occasions, which the Pulaya Nayars were entitled to. The father of Kanaran had cultivated some yam in the land belonging to the family of Emman Nayar. Emman Nayar snagged it because Kanaran's father did not pay the rent. Subsequently, on May 9, 1931, about nine months prior to the incident, the father of the accused had filed a petition against 17 of these Pulaya Nayars, including the deceased, accusing them of rowdyism and terrorism.<sup>143</sup> The Thiyyas of the locality were on their way to assert their social identity as equal citizens, and this juncture coincided with Ezhavas wishing to attain social equality and actively challenging the injustice of the upper castes.

If the violent incidents at Kalpathy were politically designed, at Kuzhalmanna and Kunnamangalam, they were events of everyday life. At Kuzhalmanna, a fight broke out because an untouchable was at a place he was not supposed to be. The violence of the upper caste Nayars was countered in the same manner by a young Ezhava. At Kunnamangalam, a Thiyya youth was ready to question and challenge the unjust caste practices. Violence was a means and tool for the manifestation of their social rights. Self-assertion by the lower castes and the courageous rebuff to the upper caste violence was a new dynamic in the twentieth century.

The Thiyya caste assertion was contested by the upper caste groups and instigated violence against them. Such violence instigated by the Nayars exhibited a desperate attempt to reinstate the caste hierarchy. In their everyday life, Thiyyas were the victims of upper-caste violence.

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143 Sessions case number 19 of 1932 dated April 26, 1932. Sessions Judgement of South Malabar 1932, Malabar Collectorate Files, No. 669, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

One such incident happened at a teashop in Veliprom at Eranad Taluk in 1937. Oravingal Kuttan, A Thiyya youth, and three friends sat at a teashop on May 3, around 7.30 pm. Tazhathe Poonattil Velayudhan Nayar and Puliyambalath Ramunni Nayar entered the tea shop and saw Kuttan and other Thiyyas sitting on the bench. By 1937, though untouchability was reduced, hegemonic caste groups were still swayed the caste hierarchy. Nayars still expected respect from the lower castes. One way to show respect was to stand up if they met any higher caste member. While these two Nayars entered the tea shop, Thiyyas were sitting, and nobody stood up. Velayudhan Nayar had just been released from jail after being convicted of the murder of one Mullasserri Kunhappu. All the persons in the shop, except Kuttan, were witnesses for the prosecution in that case, and they had given statements against Velayudhan. Noting that Thiyyas did not give proper respect, Ramunni Nayar asked Kuttan why he could not stand up when he saw them. Velayudhan Nayar also repeated the same question. Kuttan asked Velayudhan Nayar whether he wanted to pick up quarrel even after being in jail for six months. This provocative reply by a Thiyya instigated the Nayars, and a fight broke out. In this fight, both parties got injured, and Velayudhan Nayar whipped out a knife from his waist cloth and stabbed Kuttan by saying that he was prepared to go to jail again. Kuttan was murdered in this fight, and Nayars were convicted for the murder. The observation from the court was that “the accused went to the shop where five people was sitting peacefully, provoked a quarrel and then perhaps the retaliation was more forceful than he expected, he stabbed to death the man he had provoked.”<sup>144</sup>

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144 Sessions case No. 39 of 1937. In the court of sessions of the South Malabar division dated September 26, 1937. Sessions Court Judgement of South Malabar and North Malabar, 1937, Malabar Collectorate Files, 661, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Another incident of the Thiyya-Nayar conflict and the killing of a Thiyya happened at Pallikkal village of Eranad Taluk in May 1937. The *janmi* of the village, Appu Panikkar, had sent a registered notice to one Korukutty, a Thiyya tenant, threatening him with eviction since he was due for rent. On receiving the notice, on the night of May 29, Korukutty went to *janmi's* house and attacked Gopalan Panikkar, the brother of Appu Panikkar, mistaking him for the *janmi*. Gopalan Panikkar also struck back, and both parties got wounded. This incident instigated the mobilisation of the *janmi* family. On the next day in the afternoon, Korukutty went to a nearby mosque to get water and thread, which was considered to be holy and with magical powers. On his way back, he went to his friend's house and rested there. The members of the *janmi* family came to that house, and another fight occurred. They killed Korukutty and hanged him on a tree in the compound.<sup>145</sup>

These two incidents are examples of how upper caste used violence as a means to challenge the social mobility of the Ezhavas. In the second decade of the twentieth century, Thiyyas/Ezhavas were claiming their social equality. At this juncture of the 'decline of the Nayar dominance,' Nayars used violence as a means to establish their social superiority. In both these cases, Nayar landlords initiated violence when Ezhavas/Thiyyas challenged their social position.

Another aspect of the caste violence in the twentieth century Malabar is the dynamics of Ezhava/Thiyya violence against the dalit castes. In the process of asserting physical violence as a means to establish their caste identity and

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145 Sessions case No. 54 of 1937. In the court of sessions of the South Malabar division, dated, October 25, 1937. Sessions Court Judgement of South Malabar and North Malabar, 1937, Malabar Collectorate Files, 661, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

independence, there are instances in which Thiyyas/Ezhavas used the same violence against the castes lower than them.

Let us look at two incidents. The first incident occurred at Eranhippalam in Calicut *taluk* on December 26, 1929. The incident started as a minor squabble at a toddy shop. While four Cherumas had their drink at the toddy shop, two Chettys<sup>146</sup> Ayyavu and Kunhikuttan, came to the shop. While entering, Ayyavu accidentally jostled against Chathan, one of the Cherumas from the group, and he fell down. While falling, he brought down Moothoran, another Cheruman who was blind. Moothoran abused Chetty, who caused the incident. The wife of Moothoran, who was accompanying him, lifted him and took him away from the shop. Kunnnummal Chandu, a Thiyya who was present in the toddy shop, witnessed this episode, and one Cheruman speaking to Chetties like this enraged his feelings. He instigated the Chettys, and they followed the Cherumas.<sup>147</sup> On the way, they attacked and severely injured Cherumas with sticks. As a result of the injuries received, Olakuzhiyil Arunayi died on December 28, 1929.

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146 Chettys were the merchant and artisan caste groups, basically from the Tamil regions. They were given special consideration and respect in the caste system in Malabar. Bubosa described their superior social status and that they were exempt from the traditional legal system, and established their own justice system with the agreement of the local rulers. See, Mansel Longworth Dames, ed., *The Book of Durate Barbosa. An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants, Written by Durate Barbosa and Completed about the Year 1518 A.D.*, II (London, 1921), 72.

147 The complaint by the Cherumas of the incident Arunayi and Kombayi at Nadakkavu police station in Calicut on December 27, 1929, states that the beating had been done by Ayyavu Chetty and Kunhikuttan Chetty, who is the brother in law of Ayyavu. The next day, Arunayi went again to the police station to report the death of Ariyan. In the statement of this day, he said that the beating had been done by others as well as by the two Chetties. Since this is the available information, we have to assume that there were more people than Chandu and two Chetties from the Toddy shop. Sessions case No. 6 of 1930. In the court of sessions of South Malabar, dated, March 10, 1930, The Judgements of the Court of Sessions of South Malabar Division, Malabar Collectorate Files, No. 658, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Kunnummal Chandu was personally antagonistic with Cherumas. There was a case and counter case in which one Cheruma woman complained against Chandu's brother for assaulting her, and the brother of Chandu complained about her husband stabbing him. Police refused to act upon the complaint by his brother and settled the issue in favour of Cherumas, asking his brother to pay ten rupees to the cherumas woman.<sup>148</sup> The prosecution said such experiences "has inflamed the accused against Cherumas as a class and has made him ready to attack Cherumas at sight, particularly Cherumas who show signs of independence." After the incident at the toddy shop, Chandu went to a nearby shop of another Thiyya and spoke to him about the Cherumas abusing the Chetty. Chandu said that the Cherumas had turned impudent and must be taught a lesson. Chandu instigated others to mobilise and attack the Cherumas.

The second incident occurred at Katukkamkunnu in the Palakkad taluk of Malabar district in January 1932. One Raman, who was the son of the Ezhava tenant of the region, killed one Karuppan, a Malayan.<sup>149</sup> Raman used to go to the clearing in the forest every day to take his cattle out for grazing. There was a place near the cattleshed where he used to take his mid-day meal that also functioned as a kitchen. On the day of the event, he found Petta, wife of Karuppan, sleeping beside the wall of

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148 The name of Chandu's brother was Pachutty. This mentioned incident happened at Kovur in Calicut. The complaint by Pachutty was that one Kandan, a Cheruma of Kovur, had stabbed him. The wife of Kandan filed the counter complaint of assault against Pachutty to the magistrate. Sessions case No. 6 of 1930. In the court of sessions of South Malabar, dated, March 10, 1930, The Judgements of the Court of Sessions of South Malabar Division, Malabar Collectorate Files, No. 658, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

149 Malayan or Malayar (plural) are originally forest dwellers. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the forests were cleared and converted to cultivable lands, they were largely taken to agricultural work in the plains. Their little settlements called 'Pathis' are frequently found at the base of the hills in the Malabar and nearby Coimbatore districts. They rank along with Pariah.

the cattleshed near the kitchen place. She was having her period and could not sleep in her own house.<sup>150</sup> Raman started abusing her for polluting his kitchen. Petta told him that she would clean the place with the cowdung. Karuppan also assured him that the mistake would not repeat. Still he kept abusing Petta. Karuppan described the events in his dying declaration:

As they were quarrelling, I sat at the very place where I was and said: “It is because you are a boy that you are speaking like this. You had better get away untying the cattle.” Then he stabbed me with a penknife taking it from his waist saying who are you to argue with me. ... He stabbed me in my abdomen.<sup>151</sup>

In both these incidents, it was the superior hierarchical notion of Ezhavas/Thiyya which resulted in violent action. For instance, while sentencing in the murder of Karuppan, sessions judge J. C. Stoddart Esquire noted:

There was no grave and unbearable insult but merely an ordinary altercation. What provocation there was, was of the accused’s own seeking. He was infuriated with deceased because deceased a Malayan, had dared to remonstrate with him for the abusive word he had used to Petta.<sup>152</sup>

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150 The customary practices on menstruation among Hindus derived from the purity and pollution concept did not allow women to stay in their houses during the menstrual period. The upper caste women used to stay in the outrooms constructed for this purpose. For the lower caste women, this outroom was not allowed, and they had to find other alternatives. For more details on menstrual seclusion among Hindu caste groups in Kerala, see Sherin Sabu, ‘The Changing Sensory Experience of Menstruation in Central Kerala, India’, *The Senses and Society* 16, no. 1 (2021): 31–45.

151 Session case No. 67 of 1931. In the court of sessions of the South Malabar division, dated, January 25, 1932. The Judgements of the South Malabar Session Court for the Year 1932, Malabar Collectorate Files, No. 662, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

152 Session case No. 67 of 1931. In the court of sessions of the South Malabar division, dated, January 25, 1932. The Judgements of the South Malabar Session Court for the Year 1932, Malabar Collectorate Files, No. 662, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Hence, in twentieth century colonial Malabar, violence was frequently used by Thiyyas/ Ezhavas to counter the hegemonic caste violence. At the same time, the upper castes used violence as a means to establish their superior caste authority over the castes lower than them. Thiyyas also used violence against their lower castes to claim and instate their high social status.

## **2.8 Dalits Caste Assertion and Violence**

By the beginning of the twentieth century, dalit caste movements had emerged based on their assertion of self-respect in the princely states of Kerala.<sup>153</sup> Such movements in Malabar appeared much later and were embedded within the national movement, primarily led by upper-caste nationalist leaders. The active public sphere and the vibrant nationalist politics influenced the differential nature of dalit caste mobilisations in Malabar.<sup>154</sup>

Another dynamic of caste violence in twentieth-century colonial Malabar was the violence against dalits unleashed by the Nayars. Though physical violence against lower castes was ingrained in traditional caste practices, violence instituted by the Nayars after the first quarter of the twentieth century was paradigmatic in many ways. The self-assertion of the lower castes, which had a late start, was burgeoning in the third decade of the twentieth century.<sup>155</sup> By the early decades of the twentieth century,

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153 Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery*, 121–23.

154 While the dalit movements for contesting their accessibility to restricted spaces such as public roads in princely states were led by the educated dalits like Ayyankali, the movements for the entry of dalits to the temples and the public roads were a part and parcel of the national movement.

155 Scholars noted that missionary engagements with the slave castes and subsequent experiences catalysed the emergence of the dalit consciousness. (See Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery*). Christian missionary engagements in the early decades were primarily limited to the influential communities of the depressed classes, especially Thiyyas in Malabar. The Protestant Basel Mission, which had two stations in Malabar (Thalassery and Kannur), rarely, if ever worked among the slave castes. Evangelicals were afraid of the antagonism of caste Hindus and losing them. Arya Samaj and Theosophical

anti-caste ideology ascended to significance in the socio-political movements of Malabar.<sup>156</sup> Most importantly, the 1930s marked a pivotal juncture in which the emerging middle class, particularly the Nayar middle class, established its dominance in the public sphere of colonial Malabar. By the middle of the 1930s, on the one hand, we have self-asserted dalit castes demanding social justice and equality in the public sphere. Their political demands for land and social status were incorporated into the national movement and into the struggles of peasants and workers. On the other hand, we have the Nayar caste, who monopolised the land and other material fortunes by capitalising on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century political movements. The emergence of the dalits into the public sphere posed a challenge to the property-holding Nayar class.<sup>157</sup> In this phase of rapid social change, acts of violence by the Nayars against the dalits became sensational and received overwhelming public attention.

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movements also approached the slave castes very late. By the 1930's Missionary activities started engaging with dalit castes. The Chirakkal mission by Fr. Peter Caironi S.J primarily focussed upon Pulayas and other dalit groups and only started its activities in 1937. For more details, see Manmathan M.R., 'Emancipation as Repentance and Recasting: Swami Ananda Tirtha's "Harijan" Reform', *Social Orbit* 2, no. 1 (2016): 88; Ismael P. M., 'The Quest for Social Justice: Malabar (1882-1947)' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Calicut, 2009).

156 K. K. N. Kurup, 'The Intellectual Movements and Anti-Caste Struggles in Kerala', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 55 (1994): 676.

157 The Malabar Tenancy Act of 1929 and the Madras Marumakkathayam Act of 1932 initiated this decline. Dalit collectives in Malabar, such as *Adikeralodharana Sangham* and *Adidravida Jana Sabha*, started demanding various measures by the government, which, on the other hand, challenged the material fortune of the upper caste Hindus. For instance, the Memorandum by *Adidravida Jana Sabha* in 1924 demanded occupancy rights on the land and allotment of lands for cultivation along with representation in elected bodies and measures to improve educational and moral advancement. G.O. No. 3543, Dated December 13, 1924, Madras records, Law (General) Department, Regional Archives Kozhikode. Various regional bodies of these organisations also demanded land acquisition for various purposes, such as burial grounds. Since the government of Madras had very limited landholdings, this land possessed by the Nayar landlords had to be acquired. Though only 49.2 acres of land were allotted, 4679 acres had been identified by 1936. *Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council*, Vol. LXXX, pp 253-54, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

One such incident happened at Kayanna village, near Payyoli in North Malabar, in September 1937. Karunakaran Nayar was the Menon of Kayanna amsom.<sup>158</sup> On September 4, he mobilised a search party of Nayars and other upper castes to look for his cow and calf, which went missing in the morning. There was a Pariah<sup>159</sup> settlement on a hill called Kokkunnu Hill in the village, and Menon remarked that they must have stolen the cow and calf. When the search party arrived at the hill, they found the skin and head of a cow outside the house of a Pariah called Veluthan. Menon noticed that it resembled his cow. The search party started beating the pariahs at the settlement. One arm of a Pariahs was broken, and the women and children of the settlement ran away. The search party caught Veluthan, bashed him, tied his hands to the back and asked him to walk down the hill. He could not move, and then the members of the search party tied another rope around his waist and dragged him down the hill. Menon ordered to ‘wash’ the Pariah and then carrying him to his house. Veluthan died while they were taking him to Menon’s house after cleaning Veluthan. They threw the dead body into a nearby jungle and informed the same to Menon. He asked them not to divulge the matter to anyone and to tell the inquirers, if any, that the Pariah had escaped.<sup>160</sup>

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158 *Amsoms* refers to the revenue villages in colonial Malabar. Menon was a title originally given by Zamorin to his agents and writers from the Nayar caste. Traditionally, they were accountants or writers who kept records of revenues of the states, villages or the temples and affairs of the king. British rulers incorporated them into the colonial administration as record keepers/accountants of the revenue villages(*Amsoms*). For more details, see Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909), 296.

159 Pariahs were the hill tribes considered as the outcasts in the traditional hierarchy. They were considered the lowest in the caste structure. Rupa Viswanath quotes *The Hindu*, June 3, 1891: “The condition of these castes is truly miserable. The Hindus do not recognise them as part of their community and nothing can be more humiliating and intolerable than the treatment that the Pariahs . . . receive from the Hindus of higher castes. The Hindu religion has done nothing for them except to prescribe a most abject slavery as the lot for which they alone are fit.” Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, 1.

For another week, nobody reported this issue to any office. Police started the investigation only when one of the leading newspapers, *Mathrubhumi*, reported the incident on September 11, 1937. The *adhikari* also obtruded in the incident only after the incident became sensational.<sup>161</sup>

Another incident of Nayar upper caste violence against a dalit happened at Kakkur near Calicut. The Harijan Sevak Sangh was active in this village.<sup>162</sup> They ran a night school that educated the children of the untouchable castes.<sup>163</sup> The Nayars of the village were intolerant towards this initiative. They alleged as follows.

The teacher at Harijan School was fomenting communal tension in the village by instilling in the mind of the illiterate Harijan boys hatred towards higher castes, and that he explained to the boys that the word 'Nayar' was derived from the word 'Nayi' which is Malayalam for the dog.<sup>164</sup>

On April 26, 1939, around 7.30 pm, a group of 30 Nayars entered the school with sticks and assaulted the teacher. Chappunni Nayar, who was the *janmi* of the village, led this mob. They terrorised the *dalit* students of the school, and the teacher and students ran away from the building. Then, the *janmi* asked another group member

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160 Case No. 14 of 1937. In the court of sessions of North Malabar, dated January 15, 1938. Judgements of the Court of Sessions of North Malabar, Malabar Collectorate Files, 661, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

161 Case No. 14 of 1937. In the court of sessions of North Malabar dated January 15, 1938. Judgements of the court of sessions of North Malabar. Malabar Collectorate Files, 661, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

162 Harijan Seva Sangh or Harijan Sevak Sangh was an anti-untouchability movement started by Gandhi after the Poona Pact. In Kerala, the Indian National Congress, on the one hand, organised various anti-caste movements, such as the temple entry movement. On the other, Sevak Sangh focused on educating the untouchable castes.

163 Apart from the fund collected by the Harijan Sevak Sangh, labour department also funded these schools and hence it is also known as the labour night schools.

164 Letter. District magistrate Krishna Swami to the chief secretary to the Government. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 1A, Serial Number 42, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

running a tea shop nearby to shift his tea shop to the school building. Accordingly, he moved all his utensils there, converting a Harijan school into a tea shop.

The teacher of the night school, Appu, filed a complaint about the incident on April 27, 1939. The inspector of police visited the spot. After speaking to the Nayars of the locality, he submitted a report on April 30, concluding that the complaint was due to mistaken facts. As per the report, Chapunni Nayar did not trespass in to the school. He visited the school and asked for the visitor's book. He did not bring a large crowd with him, but they gathered to witness the incident. The police report concluded that he had the right to request the visitor's book. Agitated with this biased police report, Cherunni, secretary of the Harijan Sevak Sangh at Kakkur, started a hunger strike on June 1. Newspapers reported this incident and it gained immense public attention. Then, the prime minister of the Madras Presidency, C. Rajagopalachari, requested the Indian National Congress leaders of Malabar to intervene since the protest was against the police and the administration. The Congress leaders of the Malabar, E Kannan and K. Kelappan had already intervened in this matter, and Cherunni called off his hunger strike on June 6.<sup>165</sup> Yet, The congress leaders were against the police report, and E Kannan wrote to Rajagopalachari that though the Harijan teacher was assaulted and robbed, police spoiled the case. He also said that unless the government corrected the degenerate police of Malabar, discredit would come upon the government.<sup>166</sup> Later, the chief secretary asked the district magistrate to enquire and submit a report on this issue. The

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165 Letter. E Kannan to C. Rajagopalachari, dated June 16, 1939. This letter was a reply to the Rajagopalachari's letter dated June 12, 1939. Madras Records, Public Department Bundle Number 1A, Serial Number 42, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

166 Letter. E Kannan to C. Rajagopalachari, dated June 16, 1939. Madras Records, Public Department Bundle Number 1A, Serial Number 42, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

report of the district magistrate found that Nayars had committed a cognisable offence, and accordingly, they were tried and punished.<sup>167</sup>

Upper caste groups perceived dalit collectivisation and transformation to new political subjectivities as challenging their socio-economic status. As we see in these examples, they used violence as a response to these socio-political awakenings with material demands. Concurrently, since the 1930s, ideas of nationalism and equality dominated the political society and public sphere in Malabar. The strong presence of a public sphere determined the dynamics of the violence against the dalits by the Nayars in the 1930s. The political leadership stood firmly with the dalits and condemned any act of violence. Violence against dalits received adequate public attention. Paradoxically, upper-caste political leaders at the local levels supported the violence with their silence. For instance, at Kayanna, the incident was reported only after 10 days. When the case arose in the North Malabar sessions court, two important social and political workers from the upper castes were produced as the prosecution witnesses. Patavetti Edathil Kunhi Raman Nayar was a social and political worker in the locality, and Perumpilavil Kunhiraman Menon was the president of the village vigilance committee. The court did not accept their statements against the accused because they neither reported the issue to the authorities nor were willing to name the accused initially.<sup>168</sup> At Kakkur, no local leaders intervened until the issue became sensational, and the leaders at the provincial level intervened. The desire to establish caste authority remained, and violence was a tool to establish their authority.

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167 Letter. District Magistrate Krishna Swami to the Chief Secretary to the Government, Government of Madras dated 27/06/1939. Madras Records, Public Department Bundle Number 1A, Serial Number 42, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

168 Case No. 14 of 1937. In the court of sessions of North Malabar dated January 15, 1938. Judgements of the court of sessions of North Malabar. Malabar Collectorate Files, 661, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

## Summing Up

Eighteenth-century Malabar society was predominantly agrarian, and various endogamous caste groups were incorporated into the system of land relations known as *janmi-kudiyam sampradayam*. According to this system, Brahmins, the local rulers, and chieftains held superior tenure in the land, known as *janmam*. They leased/mortgaged the land for a duration of twelve years, and it was called *kanam*. Nayars held the majority of the *kanam* tenures, and in most cases, they did not engage in direct cultivation. They subleased land for one year to *verumpattam* tenants. Lower-class Nayars, a few Mappilas and Thiyyas were the *verumpattam* tenants. The dalit castes were employed as agricultural labourers. This caste structure incorporated non-agricultural sections such as artisans and tribal castes, and established a cultural and ritualistic hierarchy. *Maryada*, a localised form of brahminical code, defined the moral and legal boundaries of the caste system.

The authority of the upper castes was established through direct, structural and symbolic violence in the pre-modern caste system. Violence manifested in the extraction of surplus, enforced purity and pollution through the concepts of untouchability, unseeability, and unapproachability, as well as hierarchical punishment methods. There were not many available instances of contestations from the lower caste groups against the upper caste violence.

Mysorean intervention impacted the agrarian structure and the caste system. Brahmins, local rulers, and wealthy *kanakkars* who served the military and administrative needs of the pre-Mysorean political system left their land and moved to neighbouring territories for their safety. In this context, intermediary tenants emerged as the new landowners. The attempt of Mysorean rulers to crush the existing political

authority also demoralised the customary powers of Nayars and initiated cultural interventions in the caste system.

The British East India Company established colonial rule in Malabar with the signing of the Treaty of Srirangapatnam in 1792. They reinstated the old *janmis* and their old powers. *Janmis* became private owners of land with absolute modern property rights. The economy was closely tied to the global capitalist economy, which in turn reconfigured the pre-modern agrarian system. In this context of rapid shifts in the political economy, contestations emerged between various caste groups.

The members of the new aristocracy tried to ally with the British. The new English education provided not only employment in the colonial bureaucracy but also new morals and perspectives. Technological development, such as printing, communication, and transportation networks, necessitated broader caste solidarities. British enumerative systems led to the consolidation of a new caste identity. The middle classes emerged from the lower strata of the Nayar caste and the upper strata of the Thiyya caste, who could effectively utilise the educational and bureaucratic opportunities of the colonial rule. Formation of the public sphere provided the spatiality for such contestations.

Nayar caste reform movements were the result of the contestation between the new aristocracy and the old *janmis*. They attempted to subvert the authority of Brahmins in both social and economic spheres through various reform efforts. In this contestation, Nayars adopted legal mechanisms to establish their status. It was the discursive competence of the Nayar caste that effectively resolved this conflict without any direct or physical violence.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Thiyyas began to assert a higher social status, leading to contestations in both public and personal spheres. It was the middle class young Thiyyas who emerged from the upper strata of that community that spearheaded the contestation.<sup>169</sup> The contestation by the Thiyya elites was not limited to ideological debates, political demonstrations, or legislative reforms; violence was employed at multiple levels within the Thiyya caste reform movements. As Thiyyas asserted social equality, Brahmins and Nayars used violence against them. Simultaneously, Thiyyas themselves employed violence as part of their caste assertion. In places such as Kalpathy, violence actively shaped these assertions. Paradoxically, during this same period, Thiyyas/Ezhavas used violence against lower castes to assert their own dominance. Thus, the same caste group used violence both as resistance to upper caste aggression and as means of establishing dominance over castes considered lower than them.

The violence against the dalit groups by Nayars in the third decade of the twentieth century was paradigmatic in multiple ways. The dalit caste assertion resulted in violence against them, aiming to instate the caste hierarchy. By the mid-1930s, the dalit caste movement had become integrated with the national movement in Malabar. For instance, A. K. Gopalan, who was the leader of the Congress at that time, had recollected his memory of the first assault against him as a political leader. Lower castes were not allowed to walk through the road near a temple in Kandoth in Payyannur. A group of dalits and women under the leadership of K. A. Keraleeyan

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169 Isac and Tharakan noted the consolidation of the class interest among the Thiyya social reform movement in Travancore. Such a development was also visible in Malabar. See, T. M. Thomas Isaac and P. K. Michael Tharakan, *Sree Narayana Movement in Travancore, 1880-1939; A Study of Social Basis and Ideological Reproduction*, Working Paper no. 214 (Thiruvananthapuram, 1986).

and A. K. Gopalan marched through that road. The higher caste residents of the locality brutally attacked them.<sup>170</sup> But at the same time, local leaders at the village level, belonging to the upper caste groups, always functioned in a way that supported the violence against dalits. The dalit caste assertion did not use violence as a method in their struggles. The integration of dalit caste assertion with class-based political movement and their functioning through acceptable organisational methods was the reason for the absence of violence by the dalits in their caste assertion movements.

To conclude, what we discussed in this chapter is a caste society in transition, constantly redefining its hierarchy through contestation. In these contestations, violence operated at many layers, but often as a functional device by the elites of the caste society. It was not limited to the upper castes but was resorted to by the elite sections of the Thiyya/ Ezhava caste who used violence in fighting for equal status with the higher castes. But they also reinforced caste hierarchy through violence against the castes lower than them. The absence of violence by the untouchable castes in their assertion movements must be understood in the context of their transition to a new political subjectivity, a topic that we will explore in the following chapters. But what needs immediate attention is the fact that, along with these transitions in the Hindu caste society, socio-economic changes were also redefining the idea of religious communities. This also shaped the caste assertion movement among different caste groups. Brahmin consolidation did not always remain opposed to Nayars or to the lower castes. Similarly, scholars argued that the bourgeois characteristics of the middle-class Thiyyas introduced conservative elements into their caste assertion.<sup>171</sup> A sense of communal solidarity was emerging as a result of caste

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170 A. K. Gopalan, *Ente Agnipareekshakal* (Kozhikode, 2016), 50–51.

171 Isaac and Tharakan, *Sree Narayana Movement in Travancore*, 24–26.

reform movements, creating contestations and conflict between Hindus and Muslims, dynamics of which we will discuss in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3

### Hindu-Muslim Differences and Conflicts

The Hindu-Muslim conflicts in India have been studied extensively since religion was/is a governing *dispositif*<sup>1</sup> in colonial and post-independent India. In the 1980s, a new paradigmatic enthusiasm emerged in studying identity and community in India and globally.<sup>2</sup> Intense debates arose in academia over the source of the religious conflicts. Scholars, mainly affiliated with Cambridge historiography, attributed a pre-colonial origin to communal conflicts.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, another set of scholars argued that communalism is a modern phenomenon shaped by British colonialism and governmentality.<sup>4</sup> Studies also traced the causes of communal conflicts to the political institutions of post-independence India.<sup>5</sup>

Identity based on religion had existed among Muslims of Malabar at least since the Portuguese invasion, it was redefined into a religious community during the British period. In Malabar, “a self-conscious Mappila (Muslim) community” emerged

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- 1 The term is used with an understanding that religion functions as a specific apparatus of knowledge production, legitimisation, and dissemination. Religion is an institutional and administrative mechanism that operates within power relations.
  - 2 Surinder S. Jodhka, ‘Community and Identities: Interrogating Contemporary Discourses on India’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 41 (1999): 2957.
  - 3 See, C. A. Bayly, ‘The Pre-History of “Communalism”? Religious Conflict in India, 1700–1860’, *Modern Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1985): 177–203; Louis Dumont, *Religion, Politics and History in India: Collected Papers in Indian Sociology* (Paris, 1970).
  - 4 See, Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (1992); Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India* (New Delhi, 1984); Amrita Shodhan, *A Question of Community: Religious Groups and Colonial Law* (Calcutta, 2001); R. B. Bhagat, ‘Census and the Construction of Communalism in India’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 46/47 (2001): 4352–56.
  - 5 Steven I. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (Cambridge, 2004).

only in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> This emergence was within the socio-political spatiality of colonialism. The colonial governmentality, the opportunities provided by colonial modernity, and the reformative movements among the Mappilas together led to this emergence. Along with these processes, the Malabar Rebellion of 1921 was an important catalyst in this identity formation. It created a sharp division between the Hindu-Muslim communities in Malabar. Compounding this, representation of the rebellion in colonial and nationalist discourses strengthened identities based on religion.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Hindus as a religious community began to form after the second decade of the twentieth century. In other words, Hindu-Muslim identities had been reimagined within the context of colonial modernity. Against this background, contestations between the two religious communities emerged at various levels in colonial Malabar.

### **3.1 Hindu-Muslim Relations in pre- 18<sup>th</sup> Century Malabar**

The last chapter discussed the nature of the political economy of the agrarian society in pre-eighteenth-century Malabar. Authorities of the superior social groups were maintained through the cultural practices, reinforcing caste hierarchy in everyday life. Bayly has argued that in eighteenth-century South India, rural localities tended to evolve into ritual communities, “a miniature ordered cosmos with its own gods, shrines and procession routes, and a set of recognised boundaries which fierce supernatural guardians preserved.”<sup>8</sup> These ritual practices and belief systems were incorporated into one holistic tradition with the *brahminical* interventions. The

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6 P.P. Abdul Razak, ‘Colonialism and Community Formation in Malabar: A Study of Muslims of Malabar’ (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Calicut, 2007), 7.

7 Abdul Razak, ‘Colonialism and Community Formation’.

Malabar villages also had a similar pattern. Authorities in Malabar, as Menon described, was manifested and maintained through the ‘community of worship.’<sup>9</sup>

Other belief systems also existed alongside these traditional belief practices. Barbosa,<sup>10</sup> a sixteenth-century Portuguese traveller had stated:

Besides these eighteen castes of the Heathen (Hindu) who are the natives of Malabar ... there are other outlandish folks, merchants and traders in the land, where they possess houses and estates, living like natives, yet with customs of their own.<sup>11</sup>

He identifies three foreign groups in Malabar: Chettys, Baniyas and Muslims.

Chettys were the traders of precious stones and metals such as gold and silver. They were respectable people with their own language, “houses of worship, and idols different from those of the natives.”<sup>12</sup> They were exempted from the traditional legal system and established their own justice system with the agreement of the local rulers.

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8 Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900*, Cambridge South Asian Studies 43 (Cambridge, 2009), 35.

9 Dilip M. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar, 1900-1948* (Cambridge, 2008), 41.

10 Duarte Barbosa was a Portuguese commercial agent and linguist. He lived and travelled in Cochin and Kannur in Malabar between 1500 and 1515. Scholars have identified the problems of essentialisation and stereotyping in early European travellers’ accounts. The European agenda of colonialism and prejudices about non-Western societies could impact their empiricism. For instance, see the remarks on the Portuguese writings in Burton Stein, *Vijayanagara*, *The New Cambridge History of India* (New Delhi, 1994), 3–5. Nevertheless, such literature is important and rich in providing minor details of the Indian societies. Critical caution and corroboration are done when these accounts are used in this thesis to reproduce the knowledge about the societies of those times. For a more elaborate debate on this topic, see, Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625*, 1st edn (Cambridge, 2004).

11 Mansel Longworth Dames, ed., *The Book of Durate Barbosa. An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants, Written by Durate Barbosa and Completed about the Year 1518 A.D*, II (London, 1921), 70.

12 Dames, *The Book of Durate Barbosa*, II, 72.

Baniyas were the traders who sold goods brought from various places; probably they were the Gujarati traders of Malabar.<sup>13</sup>

While talking about the Muslims, Barbosa clearly distinguishes between the Mappilas, native Muslims, and *paradesis*, the foreign settlers. The word *paradesi/pardesi* is of Sanskrit origin, meaning foreigner.<sup>14</sup> They could be the Arab descendants who traded and settled along the coastal Malabar. They were economically prosperous and held jurisdiction in their territory and community.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the Mappilas, according to Barbosa, emerged through the marital relationships of the *paradesis* and the lower caste, considered as the lower sections among the Muslims.<sup>16</sup> Barbosa and many other modern historians noted a Mappila displacement from the coastal to the rural areas from the sixteenth century. Conversion and disruptions in trade due to early European hostility were cited as the reason for this change.

Though there are contrary opinions,<sup>17</sup> it would be reasonable to say that the expansion of Islam in Malabar during the pre-British period was amicable and peaceful. The native rulers were welcoming and tolerant toward the other religions.

As Miller states:

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13 Dames, *The Book of Durate Barbosa*, II, 73.

14 Stephen F. Dale, 'Communal Relations in Pre-Modern India: 16th Century Kerala', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 16, no. 2/3 (1973): 322, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3596220>.

15 Barbosa discussed about a Muslim governor who punishes for the crimes within the community. This could be a religious leader who interprets the religious law. Dames, *The Book of Durate Barbosa*, II, 76.

16 Dames, *The Book of Durate Barbosa*, II, 75.

17 Scholars argued that forceful conversion occurred during the Mysorean rule in Malabar. For instance, Dale argued that the conversions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were amicable but forced during the Mysoreans. Stephen F. Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier: The Mappilas of Malabar, 1498-1922* (Oxford, 1980), 85.

... mutual economic interest and religious tolerance were interacting in a balanced and positive way. The number of Arabs in the trading ports, as well as the number who married and settled in those places, increased steadily over the centuries. The influx was never large enough to produce a sense of threat. Political and religious imperialism were either absent or next to absent.<sup>18</sup>

Primarily during this period, people embraced Islam through marriage relations and the peaceful introduction of their religion by the Arabs. There is speculations about embrace of Islam by a native ruler Cheraman Perumal. Even if it is a mythical story, the existence of such narration itself is evidence of the non-antagonistic attitude of the natives toward religious conversion. It is also said that the Ali Raja, who established Arakkal Swaroopam, the only kingdom of a Muslim ruler in Malabar, was a Nayar minister of the Kolathiri King.<sup>19</sup> Thus, embracing Islam was not only permitted but also welcomed in the social and political context of pre-colonial Malabar.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars who examined the expansion of Islam in South Asia generally agreed that these expansions manifested in distinct ways. In these regions, the religious practices of the Muslim societies were shaped and moulded by the networks of traditional worship. It incorporated both *brahminical* and non-*Brahminical* ritual practices.<sup>21</sup> It was not the orthodoxy but the orthopraxy which allowed the newly

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18 Roland E. Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends* (Madras, 1992), 52.

19 Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, 57.

20 Logan noted that the Zamorin of Calicut directed that ‘one or more male members of the families of Hindu fisherman should be brought up as Muhammadans and this practice has continued down to modern times’. See William Logan, *Malabar Manual* (Madras, 1887), 1:196–97.

21 For references see, Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, 1983); Richard Maxwell Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300-1700 - Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton, 2016); Marc Gaborieau, ‘Muslims in the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 6, no. 1 (1972): 84–105,

converted Muslim communities to continue the existing tradition and then follow basic Islamic observances such as “recitation of prayer, the operation of mosque, the practice of circumcision and certain key marriage forms.”<sup>22</sup> On a similar note, looking at the Muslim communities of Tamil Nadu, Bayly argued that among the converts, ‘traditional forms of worship and devotion’ coexisted with ‘conventional Islamic observance.’<sup>23</sup>

Cultural syncretism was a feature of the pre-eighteenth-century Malabar. While discussing about the Muslims Barbosa mentioned:

There are Moors (Muslims) in great numbers who speak the same tongue as the Heathens (Hindus) of the land, and go naked like Nayars, but as a token of distinction from Heathens they wear a little round cap on their heads and long beards...They follow Heathen custom in many ways; their sons inherit half their property, and nephews (sisters’ sons) take the other half.<sup>24</sup>

As elsewhere, Sufi tradition in Malabar/Kerala developed by accommodating the local traditions and network of belief systems. Precisely because of this nature, Sufi centres and worship places were incorporated into the traditional belief systems and spiritual networks. As Bayly argues in the case of the Sufi centres in Tamil Nadu, where such centres became a local holy place which offered ‘healing and exorcism rites.’<sup>25</sup> In Malabar, shrines with the tombs of saints who said to have holly powers emerged and they were called *maqams*. Hindus and Muslims visited such centres to

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/006996677200600105>.

22 Francis Robinson, ‘Islam and Muslim Society in South Asia’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 17, no. 2 (1983): 189, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0069966783017002003>.

23 Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings*, 14.

24 Dames, *The Book of Durate Barbosa*, II, 74.

25 Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings*, 94.

solve their life crises. Even in the twentieth century, we can see Hindus visiting *maqams* or the mosques. For instance, one incident we discussed in the last chapter, one Thiyya, who was threatened by an imminent fight with the *janmis*, visited the mosque for the holy water and the sacred thread, which was considered to provide him power in the fight against the enemy.<sup>26</sup>

*Nerchas* manifested accommodation of the Muslim festivals in the traditional worship of Malabar. These were the most significant public festivals of Mappilas. *Nerchas* were conducted as ‘ritualistic worship to the Muslim saints or martyrs’ of the localities. Dale and Gangadhara Menon argued that the influence of *brahminical* and *non-brahminical* festivals and processions was visible in these *nercha*.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, these *nerchas* were always conducted with the participation of the ‘Hindu’ sections of the society, who had given specific places in these festivals.

There were many Mappila matrilineal families in Malabar. The emergence of Muslim matrilineal families is debated among the scholars.<sup>28</sup> The matrilineal communities among the Muslims of Malabar could be the result of the marriage relationship of Arab merchants with the matrilineal Nayar women<sup>29</sup> or as a result of the conversion of matrilineal Nayar families to Islam or the adaptation of a native

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26 Case No. 54 of 1937 in the court of sessions of the South Malabar division dated October 25, 1937. Sessions Court Judgement of South Malabar and North Malabar, 1937, Malabar Collectorate Files, 661, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

27 For more details see, Stephen F. Dale and M. Gangadhara Menon, ‘*Nerccas*: Saint-Martyr Worship among the Muslims of Kerala’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41, no. 3 (1978): 523–38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X00117598>.

28 To see more about this debate, see, Aleena Sebastian, ‘Matrilineal Practices along the Coasts of Malabar’, *Sociological Bulletin* 65, no. 1 (2016): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022920160106>.

29 Sebastian, ‘Matrilineal Practices along the Coasts of Malabar’, 89.

system suitable for the prolonged trading activities.<sup>30</sup> The point, however, is not the origin; Islam evolved in Malabar adopting the existing practices in even in the family and inheritance, not according to textual Islam.

When we look at the Muslim and non-Muslim sections of Malabar society in the pre-eighteenth century, it is easy to comprehend that diverse religious practices coexisted, adopting and being adopted into other networks of worship and ritual practices. It doesn't suggest that pre-colonial societies in India mitigated all the religious differences and communities remained without any antagonisms. Gupta says that premodern Indian societies had the “twin notion of differentiation from others and the stratification within them.”<sup>31</sup> However, contestations did not happen because of the absence of the self-identification of self and other, but because any contestation for better socioeconomic positions was useless in societies where hierarchy was firmly established.<sup>32</sup>

### **3.2 The formation of Mappila/Muslim Identity**

Most Muslims of Malabar are called Mappilas.<sup>33</sup> There were other Muslim social groups in Malabar, such as Ahammadiyahs and Rawthers. They were numerically insignificant, and the “overwhelming majority of Muslims in Malabar are

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30 See, Joseph Puthenkalam, *Marriage and the Family in Kerala: With Special Reference to Matrilineal Castes* (New Delhi, 1977); P. V. Balakrishnan, *Matrilineal System in Malabar* (Kannur, 1981).

31 Dipankar Gupta, ‘Communalism and Nationalism in Colonial India’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 8/9 (1993): 340.

32 Gupta, ‘Communalism and Nationalism in Colonial India’, 340.

33 Though there are Mappila Muslims in other parts of Kerala, They are concentrated in Malabar. Scholars have argued that they are not only identified with the geography but also ‘linguistically and culturally, the Mappila Muslims are for all purposes identified with Kerala’. Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, 1.

Mappilas”.<sup>34</sup> Origin of the Mappilas in Malabar is contentious in the absence of adequate historical evidence.<sup>35</sup> Yet it is agreed that Islam spread mainly through contact of natives with the Arab merchants who had a long-lasting historical trade relation with the coast of Kerala. There were Sufi *silsilas* in various parts of Kerala with their followers. However, it was a minor activity in terms of the numerical growth of the Mappilas.<sup>36</sup> The geographical location of the old Mappila settlements in Malabar was on the coastal fringes, and this illustrates the spread of Islam through the maritime trade relationship with the Arabs.<sup>37</sup> Later, Mappila settlement was expanded to the mainland. The socioeconomic conditions of the mainland Mappilas were not equal to their coastal counterparts.<sup>38</sup> The Mappilas of interior Malabar never had economic independence or social status like the coastal Mappilas. They had to endure financial distress and social subordination, similar to the untouchable caste groups.<sup>39</sup>

The arrival of European colonisers encouraged a separate identity for Muslims in Malabar. The Portuguese mercantilism with expansionist attitude posed a challenge to Muslim traders since the sixteenth century. The Portuguese arrived from Europe with the background of medieval Muslim-Christian rivalry. The King of Portugal had acquired the papal sanction to conquer the land of Muslims contingent on propagating

34 P. R. G. Mathur, ‘Social Stratification Among Muslims of Kerala.’, in *Frontiers of Embedded Muslim Communities in India*, by Vinod K. Jairath (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 113–35. His study shows at least eight ‘inter-generationally contentious, identifiable social groups’ in Kerala. Some include Rowthers, Labbai, Dakhini, Turukkan (only in the Kasargode district of present-day Kerala), and Navayath.

35 Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier*, 24.

36 Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, 53.

37 L. R. S. Lakshmi, *The Malabar Muslims: A Different Perspective* (Delhi, 2012), 11–17. Ezhimala, Kozhikode, Kannur, Kollam, Chaliyam, Parappanagadi, Tanur, Ponnani and Kodungallur are the locations of the major Muslim centres in Kerala.

38 Dilip M. Menon, *Becoming ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’: Identity and Conflict in Malabar, 1900-1936*, Working Paper no. 225 (Thiruvananthapuram, 1994), 6.

39 Dale, ‘Communal Relations in Pre-Modern India’, 326.

the Catholic religion.<sup>40</sup> The Portuguese interests transcended the profitable trade relationship with Malabar to terminate the fortunes of Muslims and establish Christianity.<sup>41</sup>

At the time that Portuguese voyages arrived in Malabar in 1498, Arab traders not only dominated the inter-oceanic trade routes but also controlled the sources of Asian spices.<sup>42</sup> The desire to monopolise commerce created the longstanding antagonism between them. Muslim traders urged Zamorin not to provide patronage to the Portuguese.<sup>43</sup> The Portuguese also identified the presence of Muslims as an obstacle to their trade ambitions.<sup>44</sup> On the one hand, they initiated attacks against

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40 Frederick Charles Danvers, *The Portuguese in India: Being a History of the Rise and Decline of Their Eastern Empire* (London, 1894), 1:xxxvi.

41 Vasco da Gama himself explained to the Zamorin about the hatred between the Portuguese and the Muslims while requesting protection against the hatred of the Muslims. Gaspar Corrêa, *The Three Voyages of Vasco de Gama and His Viceroyalty: From the Lendas Da India of Gaspar Corrêa*, trans. Hon Henry E. J. Stanley (New York, 1869), 202.

A letter from the first Portuguese Viceroy of India, Francisco d'Almeida, to the King of Portugal discussing the desire to destroy disloyal native rulers also says, "... I trust in the mercy of God that He will remember us...and if you do not possess this power, little will avail you a fortress on shore; and as to expelling the Moors(Muslims are mentioned as Moors by Portuguese) from the country, I have found the right way to do it..." Quoted in Corrêa, *The Three Voyages*. xviii.

The same aspiration of expelling Muslims to establish Christendom was visible in the letters of Afonso de Albuquerque, the Portuguese viceroy from 1509 to 1515. See his letter on April 1, 1512, quoted in Danvers, *The Portuguese in India*, vol. 1. p. xxxii-xxxiii.

42 Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier*, 37.

43 Muslim merchants spread the word that the Portuguese voyagers were the banished men from their own country and could not be trusted. See, Corrêa, *The Three Voyages*, 200–201.

44 Scholars say that the Portuguese had 'a careful distinction' when describing their rivals. They distinguished between the Muslims of the land and the Muslims of Mecca. Barbosa coins the term Mappila for the local Muslims and paradesi for the Arab Muslims. See, Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 51.

Muslims as early as the first voyage.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, they persuaded and threatened the Zamorin to expel Muslims from trades and ensure the Portuguese monopoly over spice trade. A century-long political instability was the result, with multiple peace treaties being formed and broken.<sup>46</sup> This state of political instability and continued confrontations disrupted the Arab trade and the prosperity of Mappila merchants. Many of them moved to the interior.<sup>47</sup>

Scholars believe that a substantial Mappila agriculturalists had emerged in the interior Malabar by the sixteenth century.<sup>48</sup> This expansion from coastal Malabar into the mainland is not appropriately explained as to how and when due to the

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45 There are many instances of Portuguese attacking Muslim ships without any provocation since the early times. Apart from the ships with the merchandise, they also attacked ships carrying the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. There were also early instances of burning the Muslim's houses and mosques. For details, see, James John, *The Portuguese and the Socio-Cultural Changes in Kerala: 1498-1663* (New Delhi, 2020), 134–39.

46 “Since 1503, there was a constant state of war between the area of Calicut and Cochin”. The Portuguese and Muslim traders, Portuguese and Zamorin and Zamorin and Cochin raja fought in those decades, and by 1515, Zamorin had signed a treaty with the Portuguese. This treaty was broken within a decade, and several conflicts occurred. See, Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier*, 42–43.

In 1540, another treaty was signed and broken soon, which created a permanent state of conflict until the arrival of the Dutch.

47 Prange, *Monsoon Islam*, 54.

48 The sixteenth Century Muslim scholar Shaykh Zainuddin Makhdum, while discussing the Kindness of the rulers towards Muslims, writes that “They[rulers] do not levy tax on those who possess lands or fruit gardens although they are of vast extent.” This suggests that by the late sixteenth century, Muslims had land in the interior of Malabar. Sheikh Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat Al-Mujahidin: An Historical Work in Arabic Language*, trans. S Muhammad Husayn Nainar (Madras, 1942), 52.

Duarte Barbosa, a sixteenth-century Portuguese traveller who visited Malabar, had written in his first volume that the Mappilas were provided with estates and farms in the interior of Malabar. The second edition has changed to “They are so many and so rooted in the soil throughout Malabar that it seems to me they are a fifth of its people spread over all of its province”. Longworth Dames (Ed). *The Book of Durate Barbosa*, II, p.74, Quoted in Stephen F. Dale, ‘The Mappilas during Mysorean Rule: Agrarian Conflict in Eighteenth-century Malabar’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 6, no. 1 (1976): 3.

unavailability of reliable demographic data.<sup>49</sup> Muslim merchants' necessity for direct access to the production of spices facilitated the right to land in the beginning. The embracing of Islam by the untouchable Hindu castes could also be the reason for this significant increase of the agricultural labourers in the mainland Malabar.<sup>50</sup> More importantly, the economic repercussions after the Portuguese interventions forced a substantial portion of the Mappilas to move to the mainland, looking for other livelihoods such as agriculture and become the cultivating tenants.

Another aspect of Portuguese intervention was the militarisation among the Mappilas. There was a continuous and prolonged contestation between the Portuguese and Muslims. Such conflicts and violence during this period were the result of commercial and religious interests. Violent conflicts erupted at sea and on land. Portuguese attacked Muslim ships with the goods at sea. Cabral, who arrived after Gama in Malabar in 1500, attacked and captured a ship of Muslim merchants carrying elephants and presented it to the Zamorin.<sup>51</sup> In December of the same year, he also attacked and seized Muslim vessels at the dock. He attacked these ships as a demonstration against the Mappila traders, who did not provide enough supplies for his ships but for the ships of Muslim traders. The Muslim traders raged against this attack and destroyed the Portuguese factors in Calicut. Ayres Correa, the chief factor of the Portuguese voyage and fifty-three others were killed in this attack. A

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49 Panikkar says that the Mappila population became predominantly rural between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. K. N. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar, 1836-1921* (Delhi, 1989), 51.

50 Barbosa talks about the conversion of Hindus to Muslims: "For the Heathen (Hindus) if displeased at anything become Moors (Muslims), and the Moors show them great respect, and if it is a woman, they take her in marriage." Dames, *The Book of Durate Barbosa*, II, 74. 74. The castes like Cheruman, Pulayan, Vettuvan, and Mukkuvan were converted to Islam. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 52.

51 Danvers, *The Portuguese in India*, 1:135.

counterattack by Cabral destroyed ten large ships and bombarded Calicut, and then he left for Cochin.<sup>52</sup> Such attacks and counterattacks emerging from the commercial rivalries aiming to disrupt each others' trade activities occurred often during this period.

Religious animosity was another reason for the violent conflicts between the Muslims and Portuguese. Mosques and *hajis* (the Muslim pilgrims to Mecca) were targeted by the Portuguese. Looking at many Portuguese sources, John argued that there were many instances of destroying houses and Mosques by the Portuguese.<sup>53</sup> Zayn al-Din describes the Portuguese burning of the Mishkal mosque in 1510.<sup>54</sup> This mosque was established by a prominent merchant of Calicut, Nakhuda Mishkal, in the 14th century. Scholars who studied the Muslim Portuguese relationship in Malabar have argued that the attacks on the mosques were not an attack against Muslims as a community but an attack against Islam itself.<sup>55</sup>

Attacks against the ships carrying the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca was one of the most common action by the Portuguese. Looking at the Mughal-Portuguese relationship, Pearson had argued that the religiously motivated attacks on the *hajj* pilgrims were one of the two areas where Mughals and Portuguese entered into conflict.<sup>56</sup> The attack against the *hajj* pilgrims started in Malabar as early as 1502 when Gama captured a large ship with the pilgrims and burned the ship along with the travellers. An anonymous voyager who was on the ship noted this incident:

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52 Danvers, *The Portuguese in India*, 1:70.

53 John, *The Portuguese and the Socio-Cultural Changes in Kerala*, 135.

54 Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat Al-Mujahidin*, 58.

55 Prange, *Monsoon Islam*, 142.

56 M.N. Pearson, 'Portuguese India and the Mughals', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 59 (1998): 417.

Nevertheless, at the same time we took a Meccha ship, on board of which were 380 men and many women and children, and we took from it at least 12,000 ducats and at least 10,000 more worth of goods; and we burnt the ship and all the people on board with gun powder, on the first day of October.<sup>57</sup>

This attack by Vasco da Gama was without any provocation and wholly based on religious antagonism.

Muslim merchants, along with the local rulers, organised counterattacks against these attacks. Religion was constantly invoked in the ideological support of such fights. For instance, *Tuhfat* describes the atrocities of the Portuguese in details:

The Portuguese scoffed at the Muslims and held them up to scorn. They ordered them about insolently, employed them to draw water, bespattered them and spat upon their face and body. They prevented the Muslims from their journeys, especially their pilgrimage to Mecca. They plundered their properties, burnt their cities and mosques, seized their ships, trod down the Quran and other books under their feet and burnt them.<sup>58</sup>

This book also describes the Muslims killed in the fight with the Portuguese as the *shahids* (martyrs who died in the holy war). This has to be understood in the light that this text was not intended to understand the history of Muslims, but a chronicle which looks into the present condition of the Muslims.<sup>59</sup> *Ulema*, (Muslim religious leaders and intellectuals) in the coastal region, issued *fatwas*, religious decrees interpreting

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57 *Calcoen: A Dutch Narrative of the Second Voyage of Vasco Da Gama to Calicut Printed at Antwerp circa 1504, with Introduction and Translation by J.Ph. Berjeau* (London, 1874).

58 Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat Al-Mujahidin*, 60.

59 *Tuhfat* ends with saying, "May Allah prosper the affairs of Muslims, repair their losses and fulfil their desire. Amen." Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat Al-Mujahidin*, 94.

the fight against the Portuguese as *jihad* and those killed in the battles as the *shahids*. Looking at the five sixteenth-century Arabic monographs by the *ulamas* of Ponnai, Kooria argues that the ideological settings for the fight against the Portuguese were done by such '*jihadi* literatures'.<sup>60</sup>

The permanent state of war and conflict with the Portuguese created a warrior group among Mappilas, and they were an intrinsic part of the Mappila society.<sup>61</sup> Whenever the Zamorin started his battles against the Portuguese in the later part of sixteenth century, Mappilas were his strongest allies. This engagement with the war developed a militant subjectivity among the Mappilas in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. However, the attempt here does not agree with Dales' statement that religious militancy has emerged as the "prominent cultural characteristic" of the Mappilas of Malabar.<sup>62</sup> He argues elsewhere that, by establishing British control over Malabar, the external war with the Portuguese was no longer needed. Once the external frontiers were closed, "Mappilas' militancy was expressed and revived not along the coast, but on an internal frontier."<sup>63</sup> Characterisation of Mappilas as a community which continuously looks for confrontation is a colonial construct. And Dales' arguments of internal and external frontiers inevitably fall in line. The

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60 Mahmood Kooria, "Killed the Pilgrims and Persecuted Them": Portuguese Estado Da India's Encounters with the Hajj in the Sixteenth Century', in *The Hajj and Europe in the Age of Empire*, ed. Umar Riyad, Leiden Studies in Islam and Society, vol. 5 (Leiden, 2017), 29–43.

61 The family of Kunjali Marakkar was one such group that led the fight against the Portuguese at sea for almost four generations, being the hereditary head of the naval force of Zamorin. Third Kunjali had obtained permission to establish a fortress, and Fourth Kunjali proclaimed himself the "King of Malabar Muslims" and "Lord of the Indian Seas". Prange, *Monsoon Islam*, 201.

62 Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier*, 1.

63 Stephen F. Dale, 'The Islamic Frontier in Southwest India: The Shahīd as a Cultural Ideal among the Mappillas of Malabar', *Modern Asian Studies* 11, no. 1 (1977): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00013214>.

militancy or a military group that emerged within the Mappila society cannot be attributed to the 'prominent' cultural characteristic. The spatial context of the confrontations with the Portuguese was the coastal regions. Often, Mappila traders engaged in those conflicts. It was not a war organised by the Mappilas as a community, but by the traders and warrior class among the Mappilas with and for the existing local rulers. The location of the '*jihadi* literatures' which Kooria talks about was Ponnani, a prominent coastal town which the Mappila traders dominated. *Tuhfat* also emerged from the same spatial contexts. The language of these texts was Arabic, not the local language, which suggests that it was intended to "make them more accessible to a wider Muslim audience outside the domain of Malabar."<sup>64</sup> The interior Mappilas were not part of these wars to any great extent.

However, Portuguese invoked the religious identity of the Mappilas Muslims, and a self-identification and consolidation happened. Mappilas came in contact with the militant tradition through persistent resistance against the Portuguese invasion. This was a profound shift in the history of Muslims in Malabar.<sup>65</sup> "Economic retrogression, estrangements from Hindus and bitterness against the Christians and new militancy" was the total outcome of the Portuguese period for the Mappilas of Malabar.<sup>66</sup>

The Mysorean invasion of Malabar in the eighteenth century radically altered the nature of the rural Mappilas.<sup>67</sup> A few of the Mappilas were also beneficiaries of the

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64 Kooria, "Killed the Pilgrims and Persecuted Them", 40.

65 Prange, *Monsoon Islam*, 15.

66 Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, 75.

67 The Portuguese power had declined in Malabar costs by the early seventeenth century. The successive emergence of Dutch power in Mahe and the early British settlements in Calicut, Thalassery, and Anjuthengu in the seventeenth century had little impact on Mappila's life. Though religious antagonism towards Muslims was absent among the

displacement of old *janmis* in the context of Mysorean invasion. Some of the intermediary tenants from the Mappilas became the new *janmis*. Yet, this period did not account for any significant change in the material condition of the Mappilas. There is no evidence to say that Muslims population had increased during the Mysorean rule in Malabar. The scholars who argued that the demographic count of Muslims had risen during the Mysorean time argued it without any evidence. For instance, while Miller makes this argument, he writes: “Although statistics are not available, the size of the Muslim community must have sharply increased during this period despite the relatively short reigns of the Muslim rulers”.<sup>68</sup> Even the British noted that the Mysoreans did not sanction the cultivable lands to whom they pleased.<sup>69</sup> There was no significant increase in the land possessed by the Mappila agriculturalists even after the Mysorean rule.<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, there was a significant shift in the ways in which the Mappilas perceived the traditional rural political structure. As we discussed, the Portuguese had already invoked the Muslim identity, and there was a militant consciousness emerging among the Mappilas with an embryonic political consciousness. At a juncture in which the traditional political structure had been displaced due to the eloping of *janmis* and local chieftain, encounter with the new rulers invoked a political

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Dutch, they concentrated highly on the trade monopoly. Increased European rivalries in trade further deteriorated the condition of the Mappila Muslims. Their movement to the mainland increased, and they sought employment in agriculture and small industries. See, Dr. S. Sharafudeen, *Muslims of Kerala A Modern Approach* (Trivandrum, 2003), 28.

68 Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, 94.

69 Dale, ‘The Mappilas during Mysorean Rule’, 7.

70 A statement from a Mappila to a British settlement officer in 1793 says: “The Nimboories (Nambudiri Brahmins) have many jenmam or estate and those whom they sold them possess those jenmam or estates -which among the Mappilas maybe ten in hundreds- but the Mappilas possess many *kanams* or farms.” Quoted in Dale, ‘The Mappilas during Mysorean Rule’, 5.

consciousness among some of the Mappilas. As a result, some of the Mappilas attempted to establish political power by displacing the hierarchy and even challenging the authority of Mysorean rulers. Athan Moye Kurikkal, a *kanakkar* and a revenue official of Tipu in Eranad *taluk*, had attacked and tried to capture the house of Manjeri Kornopad Raja in 1784.<sup>71</sup> Another example of the emerging political aspirations among Mappilas was of the Ellambulasheri Unni Muppan, who planned and executed his own conquest while fighting along with Tipu in Travancore.<sup>72</sup> These histories tells us that there were instances in which Mappilas were discontent and insurgent with the Mysorean rulers.<sup>73</sup>

To summarise, a full fledged Mappila Muslim community did not emerge during Mysorean period. Even the scholars who traced a Muslim community in the south in the eighteenth century attribute the creation of the ‘limited sense of community’ to the rise of the Muslim ruled state. The rise of Carnatic rulers in Tamil Nadu was said to be the reason for the emergence of a limited Muslim community in

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71 Karnopad Raja had already made a treaty with Hyder Ali in 1780 with an agreement to share his income in exchange for supporting his undisturbed rule as a dependent of Hyder Ali. So when one Tipus’ revenue official treated his rule, Tipu dispatched troops to support the Karnopad Raja. Though initially defeated by the Mappilas under Athan Moye, Tipus’ troops eventually suppressed the insurgency and imprisoned Athan Moye and his son, Manjeri Kurikkal, at Srirangapatnam. See Dale, ‘The Mappilas during Mysorean Rule’, 11.

72 Joint Commissioners report in 1793 mentioned Unni Moopan’s aspiration toward sovereignty. For instance, “He is connected with all the robbers on the coast from Calicut to Chowghaut, receives a share of their plunder and maintain a kind of sovereign authority over them...kept a faquir (faqir) to read Persian... also maintained two Brahmins with silver sticks who went about the country to gain intelligence... beat the negarra(A kettledrum widely employed by Indo-Muslim rulers as one outward sign of their sovereignty) and was prayed for by all the priests of the country.” Madras Office Records, *Joint Committee Reports, IV*, 247. Quoted in Dale, ‘The Mappilas during Mysorean Rule’, 12.

Dale, ‘The Mappilas during Mysorean Rule’, 13.

73 Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, 95.

the eighteenth century.<sup>74</sup> This was not the case with Malabar. Though the Mysoreans with a Muslim religious background established their rule in Malabar, it did not have much impact on the Muslims of Malabar. This was due to two reasons: First, the rule of the Mysoreans did not characterise a Muslim rule, and even the Muslims of Malabar and the local elite Muslims did not perceive it as their rule. Second, the Mysorean rule was short-lived. Even in the total 25 years of the conquests, the total exertion of authority by the Mysoreans was much lower. However, an economically independent Mappila agriculturalist group displaying rudimentary political consciousness against the traditional political institutions, had emerged during this period.

The British established their political authority over Malabar in 1792. Their immediate objective was to extract maximum possible revenues from Malabar so that they could meet the expenses of their expansionist war. The estimated revenue was very high. Moreover, Malabar, which went through a prolonged war and political instability, could not meet the estimation.<sup>75</sup> Since 1806, a monopoly on salt, tobacco and timber trade and their taxation resulted in inflated prices of these products, and it was another economic burden on the lower peasantry.<sup>76</sup> The British started taxing everything possible, including dwellings, further intensifying the burdens on the lower rungs.

Revenue assessment and tax collection were not standardised, and the affluent sections of society could evade their actual taxes using the biases of the village officials. The assessment was not based on land measurement, “but on the quantity of

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74 Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings*, 151.

75 Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 4.

76 Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 12–16.

seeds sown and the number of trees in each garden.”<sup>77</sup> The lands of the affluent classes were under assessed mainly. On the contrary, an assistant collector noted, “the gardens of all the poorer classes are assessed so high that these poor creatures cannot pay the public revenue out of the *pattom* or proprietors’ net rent without the sale of some of the household furniture.”<sup>78</sup> Though the revenue responsibility was fixed on the *janmis*, who were the registered owners of the land, in many instances, the lower tenants were coerced into paying the rent by the revenue officials. Those who could not meet the state’s and landlords’ demands were threatened by legal eviction and *melcharths*.<sup>79</sup> Hence, the economic extractions were not only extreme but also unjust and against the ‘moral economy.’<sup>80</sup>

Against this background, the Mappila peasant insurgencies erupted in the nineteenth century. Their encounter with the outsiders in the previous two centuries had equipped Mappilas of Malabar with an ‘embryonic political consciousness.’<sup>81</sup> They could envision a political structure against the traditional political system of

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77 Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 7.

78 Assistant Collector to the Collector of Malabar on January 24, 1829. Quoted in Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 7.

79 *Melcharth* was an over-leasing of the existing *kanam* rights to a third party by the *janmi*. “The *melcharth* holder could legally proceed against the *kanakkaran* for redemption. Using this method, *janmi* could bring the intermediary tenants to court without involvement in the legal procedure. Panikkar argues that *melcharths* were unknown during the pre-British period. See K. N. Panikkar, ‘Agrarian Legislation and Social Classes: A Case Study of Malabar’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 13, no. 21 (1978): 884–85.

80 The term moral economy is used here similarly to what Thompson developed. “A traditional view of norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community”. Subsistence rights of the lower sections were reciprocally recognised in the moral economy. For more details, see, E. P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, *Past and Present* 50, no. 1 (1971): 76–136.

81 The term is quoted from Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983).

Malabar or the Europeans.<sup>82</sup> The religious leadership in the early nineteenth century had already asked the converted peasants to challenge the overlordship through changing the language usage and religious assertion.<sup>83</sup> Thus, not the political aspirations but the elementary political consciousness among the subalterns led to the series of peasant outrages of Mappilas in Malabar.

### 3.3 Colonialism and Rise of New 'Hindus' in Malabar

The Hindus, as a religious community we know today, did not exist until the twentieth century.<sup>84</sup> There were different *jatis*, such as Nambutiris, Nayars, Cherumas, etc.; still, the feeling of Hinduism as a unifying factor across these *jatis* did not exist then.<sup>85</sup> More interestingly, the eighteenth-century brahminical work *Keralolpathi* included Mappilas in one of the 72 lineages in premodern Kerala.<sup>86</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the British administration used Hindu as an umbrella term for different

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82 For instance, by declaring himself as the 'king of Malabar Muslims and 'Lord of Indian Seas', Fourth Marakkar directly challenged both Zamorin and Portuguese. Because the hereditary title of Zamorine was Samudra Raja, and the Portuguese kings had adopted the "bombastic title 'Lord of Guinea and of the Conquest, Navigation, and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, and India'" Prange, *Monsoon Islam*, 201.

83 For instance, Thangal of Thirurangadi had asked the converted Muslims in 1852 not to use the ". "honorific 'though' (in plural) ... but 'you' (In the singular)' and not follow the customary eating of the leftovers and not to plough the lands on Friday. D. N. Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950* (Delhi, 1991), 124.

84 As elsewhere, the term 'Hind' was used to denote the geographical specificities of the Malabar. For instance, in the sixteenth century, Zayn al-Din used the term Hind to indicate the region. While discussing the arrival of the Portuguese, he says that their ships anchored off Fandarina(Panthalayani Kollam) towards the close of the 'mawasim-al-Hind (sailing season in Hind). Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat Al-Mujahidin*, 53.

The other foreign travellers also used the term with geographical connotations. For details, see, S Muhammad Husayn Nainar, *Arab Geographers' Knowledge of South India* (Madras, 1942).

85 Menon, *Becoming 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'*, 7.

86 Abdul Razak, 'Colonialism and Community Formation', 328.

castes.<sup>87</sup> Yet, the idea of a Hindu, including various castes, was appropriated much later, only in the third decade of the twentieth century at the earliest.

Unlike Bengal and other parts of North India, the search for Hindu identity happened very late in Malabar. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the colonial states' intervention in the customary and belief practices of the natives was significantly less in Malabar. In Bengal and other British presidencies, Hindu identity emerged within the debates about the authentic past in the nineteenth century in the context of the intervention of the colonial state in the customs of marriage and other rituals.<sup>88</sup> In Malabar, the British never initiated enactments on customary life until and unless any such practices directly conflicted with colonialism's political and economic interests.

Reformers from Malabar were not focussing on the 'individualistic-female oriented' reform programs but on the inequalities within the Hindu castes.<sup>89</sup> Most of the social legislation in colonial Malabar resulted from the social reform movements by concerned sections of society. Even when there was a greater popular demand for the state's interventions, the colonial state was cautious and continuously aligned with the socially and politically dominant groups. In the twentieth century, the demands of social reformers were met only because the emerging middle class of these sections could establish their dominance in the public and political spaces. So, the threat to the

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87 In the census report 1871 of Madras presidency, various castes were put under the common category of the Hindus

88 Colonial state's abolition of sati, child marriage, regulations on minimum age for marriage, sanctioning widow remarriage, etc. initiated cultural enquiry for the past, and it was within this enquiry a novel and larger Hindu identity emerged. See, K. N. Panikkar, 'Colonialism and Cultural Change', in *Colonialism, Culture, and Resistance*, by K. N. Panikkar, Oxford India Paperbacks Collected Essays (Oxford, 2011), 24.

89 M. R. Manmathan, 'Temple as the Site of Struggle: Social Reform, Religious Symbols and the Politics of Nationalism in Kerala', *Advances in Historical Studies* 02, no. 02 (2013): 57.

longstanding customs and belief systems did not come from the colonial state but from different sections of society. Hence, seeking a common past, which created a sense of the uniform Hindu elsewhere, did not occur in Malabar.

Second, the social reform movement of Malabar happened in the context of the rivalry between dominant caste groups over material resources and political positions. This context did not call for a unified religious identity; rather, different caste identities were asserted, and they were looking to the past and present to establish or disprove the social superiority of each caste.

Early European interventions did not threaten any Hindu caste groups in Malabar to any larger extent. The influx of Mappilas into the mainland and embracing Islam by the lower castes were not contentious in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But, the Mysorean invasion, for the first time, threatened the material and ideological superiority of Nambutiri *janmis*. They had to migrate to neighbouring territories for safety, leaving their land and properties behind. Reinstating these *janmis* by the British created contestations. These contestations were not limited to the Hindu caste groups. It was this peculiar conjuncture in which various Hindu caste groups and Mappilas came into direct conflicts.

Since the traditional aristocracy was re-established, caste and class consolidation of *janmis* had started. This consolidation was not only against the opportunistic intermediary tenants who proliferated in their absence but was also against the Mappilas. The anguish of the Mysorean invasion was a constituent factor in this. *Janmis* perceived Mappilas as the agents of Mysorean rule. Scholars argued

that *Yogakshema Sabha* intentionally used ‘fearful memories of the Mysorean invasion’ to create a sense of unity within the community.<sup>90</sup>

Reciprocally, the *verumpattakkar* and agricultural labourers, of which Mappilas were a significant number, were worried about the double burden of taxes upon them. In the pre-Mysorean period, they had to pay tribute to the *janmis*. Mysorean administration started collecting direct tax from the cultivators. When the *janmis* returned, they thought they had to pay taxes to the government and tributes to the *janmis*. Moreover, the economic exploitation by the colonial state was overwhelming to the agriculturalists.

This antagonism sharpened when the *janmis* fixed heavy rent and enormous renewal fees for leases on the land.<sup>91</sup> Now, *janmis* also started oppressing those who embraced Islam. They were denied lands for burial grounds and constructing mosques.<sup>92</sup> Logan, as the special commissioner looking into land tenures, noted that the Mappila insurgencies were the counteraction to the overwhelming novel powers of *janmi* to evict tenants that acquired through backing of the British court.<sup>93</sup> A combination of religious antagonism and economic suppression was creating tensions. For example, at Pallippuram, a Brahmin *janmi* evicted several Mappila tenants for constructing a mosque against his wish on land, which had uncertain ownership. This

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90 Manmathan M.R., ‘In Defence of Tradition: Elite Resistance to Mysorean Rule in Malabar’, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 69 (2008): 488.

91 Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 1–48.

92 When William Logan was appointed as special commissioner to look into Malabar’s land tenures and tenant rights, another objective was to consider a longstanding Muslim grievance on the difficulty in obtaining land for mosques and burial grounds. Logan submitted a proposal to consider acquiring land for Muslim cemeteries under the Land Acquisition Act whenever necessary, and the government adopted the proposal. *Malabar Special Commission, 1881-82, Malabar Land Tenures*, no. 1 (Madras, 1882).

93 *Malabar Special Commission, 1881-82*. para. 288.

led to the insurgency at Pallippuram in 1881.<sup>94</sup> In this backgrounds, series of outrages by Mappila peasants erupted throughout Malabar. Sharafudeen has listed more than twenty-two outbreaks from 1836 to 1853 in which individual Muslims fatally stabbed Hindu *janmis*.<sup>95</sup>

### **3.4 The Malabar Rebellion of 1921**

By the end of the nineteenth century, there was a flattening in the Mappila unrest. The agricultural economy was distressed due to the new revenue settlement and the increased rent assessment by the colonial British.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, new employment opportunities had opened up in the army, rubber plantations and timber trades. So, by the end of this century, a significant Mappila population had sought employment in one or more of these new opportunities. Some had started petty retail businesses in the local markets. Affluent Muslims realised the importance of modern education, and sought it.<sup>97</sup> There was a change in the outlook of the Mappila community, and the relationship with other communities also changed. In fact, from 1898 to 1915, there were no Mappila outbreaks in Malabar. This changed nature, and the considerable improvement in relationships with other communities was visible during the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat Movements in Malabar.

A combination of the Non-Cooperation, Khilafat, and the tenancy movements created new enthusiasm for Indian National Congress (hereafter Congress) activities

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94 Logan points out various such religious pretexts for Mappila insurgency. For instance, at Melattur in 1880, the renouncing the Islam by the convert, and at Kulathur in 1873, a quarrel about the land for a mosque dormant for more than twenty-five years emerged as the issues. *Malabar Special Commission, 1881-82*.para. 290(c).

95 Sharafudeen, *Muslims of Kerala A Modern Approach*, 34.

96 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:681–706.

97 Sharafudeen, *Muslims of Kerala A Modern Approach*, 37.

in Malabar in 1920.<sup>98</sup> This attracted considerable Mappila agriculturalists, landless labourers and religious leaders towards and they became politically oriented against the colonial British and the landlords. The social base of Congress changed, and substantial subaltern masses of the Malabar society began to participate actively in political activities.<sup>99</sup> Khilafat committees, which sprouted in most villages, began organising meetings and events. As elsewhere, the launching of this movement aimed to develop Hindu-Muslim unity and strengthen the national movement against the British. It increased to such an extent that thousands of Mappilas from Malappuram, Pookkottur, Pattambi, etc, travelled to Thrissur on February 29, 1921, to protect Congress-Khilafat activists, mostly belonging to Hindus, from the attacks of the British loyalists.<sup>100</sup>

By July 1921, colonial administration began to disrupt the meetings and activities of Khilafat-Non-Cooperation, creating larger discontent among the volunteers.<sup>101</sup> The police started to arrest and attack the volunteers. Though the

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98 Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 123.

99 The first Congress conference was held in Calicut in 1903. Nevertheless, no significant political activity existed until the Home Rule movement began in 1916. Though this movement could spread into various localities of the Malabar, the substantive mass base remained among the elite sections of the society. For instance, as K. N. Panikkar illustrates, “of the 443 members of the reception committee and delegates to the district conference, 108 were landlords, 111 lawyers, 52 merchants, 25 retired civil servants and employees of the private sector, 34 teachers and 10 doctors. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 119.

100 On February 20, the Congress activists had organised a meeting against the arrest and imprisonment of their leaders, K. Madhavan Nayar, Yakub Hassan, U Gopala Menon, and Moideen Koya. The loyalists who were mostly Christians who supported the British disrupted this meeting, and this created a series of conflicts between the loyalists and the Congress activists and the Hindus and Muslims who supported the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation were attacked on February 28. Muslims from various parts of Malabar were mobilised and travelled to Thrissur in this context to protect them. A consensus was reached during the meeting between the two groups that night, and Mappilas returned the next day. Mozhikunnathu Brahmadathan Nampootirippadu, *Khilafat Smaranakal* (Kozhikode, 2015), 23–26.

101 Brahmadathan Nampootirippadu, *Khilafat Smaranakal*, 28–29.

necessity of non-violence was acknowledged, as the secretary of the Malabar District Congress Committee remarked: “The volunteers were uncertain about the limit of the non-violence.”<sup>102</sup> The movement turned violent after the incident at Thirurangadi, where British forces and Khilafat volunteers battled each other. Rebellion achieved communal character in the third stage, when the British forced the Hindus to identify the Mappila rebels, and the Mappila rebels considered such persons as traitors and mercilessly attacked them and their families.<sup>103</sup>

The nature and character of the Malabar rebellion is a matter of considerable debate. One set of scholars stresses the agrarian discontent among the Mappila peasantry and argues that it was a peasant rebellion.<sup>104</sup> Whereas the other set of scholars focuses on the religiosity of Muslims and the communal reasons for the violent events in the rebellion.<sup>105</sup> The scholars also recognised the ideological mediation of religion in this agrarian revolt.<sup>106</sup> As discussed earlier, Mappilas had developed a political consciousness about their existence and had an alternative vision

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102 K. P. Kesava Menon, *Kazhinjakalam* (Kozhikode, 2016), 85.

103 1921 April to 20 August is considered as the first stage of the rebellion, characterised by police brutality and arrests to oppress the Khilafat-Non-cooperation agitation. Volunteers strictly adhere to the principles of non-violence. Police action at Thirurangadi mosque on 20 August and successive retaliation by the Mappilas was considered the second stage of the rebellion. In this period, Congress abandoned the Mappilas, yet the Mappila attacks were against the state infrastructure and the personnel. The third stage of the rebellion started with the firing at Pookkottur and successive military action by the British. E. M. S. Nambudirippad, *Kerala charithram Marxist veekshanathil* (Thiruvananthapuram, 2012), 223–26.

104 See, Conrad Wood, *The Moplah Rebellion and Its Genesis* (New Delhi, 1987); Kathleen Gough, ‘Peasant Resistance and Revolt in South India’, *Pacific Affairs* 41, no. 4 (1968): 526; Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950*; R. L. Hardgrave, ‘The Mappilla Rebellion, 1921: Peasant Revolt in Malabar’, *Modern Asian Studies* 11, no. 1 (1977): 57–99.

105 Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*; Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier*.

106 Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*; David Arnold, ‘Islam, the Mappilas and Peasant Revolt in Malabar’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 9, no. 4 (1982): 255–65.

of political structure and institutions. Their separate religious identity was perceived as intrinsically linked with their subalternity. Hence, religion functioned as an ideological and material force in this rebellion, instigated by agrarian discontent and envisioned an alternative political order.

The aggravation of communal disharmony was one of the severe consequences of the rebellion. The narratives of the rebellion, by the colonial administrators and nationalist writers contributed much to this antagonism. Colonial accounts of the rebellion had created an image of the fanatic Mappila.<sup>107</sup> On the other hand, nationalist leaders like Madhavan Nayar wrote that the movement initiated by Congress aimed at Hindu-Muslim unity and strengthening of national movement turned into communal animosity due to the 'religious fanaticism, anarchy and immorality' of the Mappilas.<sup>108</sup> The description of the atrocities committed by Muslims against Hindus enlarged the divide. For a short term, Hindus were not only antagonised with the Mappilas but also distanced themselves from Congress because they accused it of bringing all these troubles by launching the movement with the Mappilas.<sup>109</sup> Mappilas perceived Hindus and Congress as traitors who left them to their own miseries when the police started the repressive actions.<sup>110</sup>

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107 Since the establishment of the British authority, the enquiries into the peasant insurgencies concluded that the fanaticism of the Mappilas was the reason for the revolt. K. N. Panikkar, ed., *Peasant Protests and Revolts in Malabar* (New Delhi, 1990), xiv.

Later studies depended upon this understanding. See, G. R. F. Tottenham, *The Mappila Rebellion, 1921-1922* (Madras, 1922).

R. H. Hitchcock, *A History of the Malabar Rebellion, 1921* (Madras, 1925).

108 K. Madhavan Nayar, *Malabar Kalapam (Malabar Rebellion)* (Mathrubhumi Books, 1987), 89. My translation.

109 Kesava Menon, *Kazhinjakalam*, 116.

110 Kesava Menon, *Kazhinjakalam*, 116.

The Non-Cooperation-Khilafat Movements were Mappilas' first engagement with modern political mobilisation. After the rebellion, they were marginalised from contemporary political engagements. The Hindu Congress leadership was not confident in organising Muslims, especially from the rebellious regions. They excluded these regions and the people any political activities. Even after a decade, when the Congress organised a *jatha* from Kannur to Guruvayur as part of the temple entry movement in 1931, members boarded the train from Feroke to Tirur to avoid marching through the Eranad taluk. One of the *jatha* members and a later communist leader wrote in his memoir:

There was a rumour that the Mappilas may obstruct the march. Time hasn't cured the wounds of British oppression of 1921. The attitude of elite and conservative Hindu leaders did not help it; instead, it made it worse.<sup>111</sup>

Mappilas, at many instances, came into confrontation with Congress leaders. For example, K. P Keshava Menon's residence was attacked after he wrote an article in a newspaper *The Hindu* that he had information of forceful conversion during the rebellion from the victims.<sup>112</sup>

A nationalist newspaper, *Mathrubhumi*, was established in 1922 under the Congress leaders. K. P Keshava Menon was the first editor of the *Mathrubhumi*. Two years later, in 1924, a Muslim Congress leader, Muhammad Abdurahiman, established another newspaper for Muslims, since he considered *Mathrubhumi* was not acceptable to the Muslims. A conception that *Mathrubhumi* for Hindu nationalists and *Al-Ameen*

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111 K. Madhavan, *Oru Gandhian Communistinte Ormakal* (Thiruvananthapuram, 2016), 87.

112 Kesava Menon, *Kazhinjakalam*, 111–12.

for Muslim nationalists persisted.<sup>113</sup> The idea of separate religious interests was also deep-rooted in the debates in the legislative councils. For instance, the Mappila legislator from Madras accused that the intention of excluding Mappila *marumakkathayees* from the scope of the Madras Marumakkathayam Act, 1932 was to delay the development of the Mappila community.<sup>114</sup> The bills which led to this enactment had included a provision for compulsory partition in the case of conversion.<sup>115</sup> This was an exclusive provision to Malabar. The legislative intervention on the matrilineal system of the Travancore and Cochin had started much earlier, and the legislative enactments there, which were said to be the basis for the bill in Malabar, did not include such a provision.<sup>116</sup> The co-existence of different religious practices was considered impossible in those decades.<sup>117</sup>

As Dilip Menon points out, Mappilas and Thiyyas emerged as the beneficiaries of the economic boom in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The movement of Thiyyas to the urban areas created a contestation over the spaces with Mappilas. The surplus from the economic boom had been invested in commerce,

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113 Nambutirippad, *Kerala charithram Marxist veekshanathil*, 232.

114 Pocker Sahib in the Legislative Council, *Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council* Vol. LIX, No. 2, pp. 207-208.

115 In 1931, R.M. Palat and V.P. Narayanan Nambiyar introduced the Bill Number 20 of 1931 and the Bill Number 13 of 1931 in the Madras Legislative Council. These Bills aimed to define the law of succession and family management among Nayar *marumakkathayees*. It included the clauses of succession, guardianship, management of taravad property, partition and adoption. These bills created extensive debates in the legislative council, and after many discussions and negotiations, these two bills were combined and made into the Madras Marumakkathayam Act in 1933.

116 See more about the Nayar regulations in princely states of Kerala see, Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847 - 1908* (New Delhi, 1976), 253–64.

117 Irfan Habeeb R. T., 'Colonial Legislation and Social Change in Kerala: Making of Madras Marumakkathayam Act, 1932' (Unpublished M.Phil. Thesis, University of Hyderabad, 2015), 98.

which also became a contested area.<sup>118</sup> When Thiyyas developed a larger political identity after the middle of the 1930s, the dynamics of these conflicts changed. Such contestations, considered in the beginning as the conflict between “two communities jostling for control of local commerce,” became the conflicts between the two religions by the middle of the 1930s through the intervention of political parties and the state.<sup>119</sup>

With the emergence of the socialists within the Congress, there was a persistent attempt to bring Muslims back to the nationalist movement. On June 13, 1937, the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (hereafter KPCC) meeting at Calicut formed a Muslim Contact Committee headed by Muhammad Musliar, the recently elected vice-president of the Malabar District Board.<sup>120</sup> However, this had minimal results since the appeal of the Muslim Congress leaders was outrightly refused by the Mappilas in many localities.<sup>121</sup> Congress socialist leaders like P. Krishna Pilla and M.P. Damodaran were obstructed in public speeches whenever they made remarks about the Muslims.<sup>122</sup>

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118 Menon, *Becoming 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'*.

119 Menon, *Becoming 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'*, 2.

120 Fortnightly Reports for the second half of June 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

121 For instance, in the second half of June 1937, Muhammad Musliar and Muhammad Abdurahiman visited Pandikkad, the crucial area of the Mappila rebellion, to persuade local Mappilas to form a Muslim Contact Committee. They met with a point-blank refusal, Fortnightly Reports for Second Half of June 1937, Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

122 While speaking at Thalassery, Krishna Pilla had remarked that it was a pity that Muslims in some places were not working with the Congress. He had to sit down after being warned by the Muslims in the audience not to speak in their vein. At Ponnani, M.P. Damodaran MLA referred to general poverty and said that it was driving Mappila women and children onto the streets. The audience took objection to this reference, and Madhavan had to leave the meeting. Fortnightly Reports for the First Half of June, 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

Mappila Muslims had to use the opportunities in the public sphere to bring forth their social, political and economic grievances. Since the Congress or the nationalists excluded Muslims, Muslim political organisations gained momentum in the third decade of the twentieth century. Here, the Muslim League and Muslim Majlis facilitated the incorporation of Mappilas into the public sphere.<sup>123</sup> Hence, in the aftermath of the rebellion, the public sphere of Malabar was divided along the lines of religious identities. Conflicts, exclusions and inequality were common in colonial Malabar's public sphere.

### 3.5 Spatial Conflicts: Mosques

Hindu-Muslim violence in twentieth-century Malabar, to a great extent, revolved around religious spaces such as temples and mosques. In the twentieth century, Mappila neighbourhood gravitated towards the mosques. There used to be local markets surrounding every mosque, where Muslims ran most of the shops, and the merchants of these local bazaars financially supported the mosques and related religious institutions.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, as Dilip Menon argues, the 'community of worship' among the Hindus was centred around the shrines.<sup>125</sup> Landlordism in Malabar was institutionalised in the *taravad* (household) in the nineteenth century, which owned land, wetland and forest resources. In the nineteenth century, these *taravads* exercised their secular authority over all sections of the society, including Mappilas. The head of

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123 Salah Punathil, 'Kerala Muslims And Shifting Notions Of Religion In The Public Sphere', *South Asia Research* 33, no. 1 (2013): 1–20.

124 Lakshmi, *The Malabar Muslims*, 63.

125 In contrast with the 'temples', which were only accessible for the Nayars and Brahmins and for the *taravads* of the locality, these shrines were accessible to all, regardless of caste. Each caste group performed different roles during shrine festivals, which reproduced the mutually dependent but culturally secluded caste system. For more details, see, Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 40–61.

the *taravad* settled disputes among the Mappilas, and they donated rice to the local mosques as patronage.<sup>126</sup> This secular authority did not challenge the powers of Muslim religious institutions such as mosques and *ulemas*.<sup>127</sup>

In pre-colonial Malabar, the rulers were generous in providing lands for the mosques.<sup>128</sup> However, since the reinstatement of old *janmis* by the British, the construction of mosques in their lands became a point of dispute. The distress due to the Mysorean rule was not the sole determinant, but the commodification of land under the colonial economic system also explains this change in the practice. These contestations were negotiated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where amicable resolutions were made in most cases.<sup>129</sup>

After the Malabar rebellion, the Madras government passed a law in 1923 insisting on prior approval of the district collector for using any sites to construct a

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126 Dilip Menon quotes an interesting incident from E.J. Miller. In 1937, when a section of Mappilas joined the Ahamediya faction, which is considered heretical by the traditional Muslims, the head of the *taravad* rejected the gift from them. He also refused to provide them with rice. It resonated with the traditional system of social exclusion of heretics. This means religion mattered little in traditional practices. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 18.

127 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 18.

128 Logan makes an interesting remark: "How the Muhammadans came to adopt this same style for their mosques is perhaps to be accounted for by the tradition, which asserts that some at least of the nine original mosques were built on the sites of temples and that the temple endowments in the land were made over with the temples for the maintenance of the mosques. Before Muhammadanism became a power in the land, it is not difficult to suppose that the temples themselves thus transferred were at first used for the new worship, and this may have set the fashion which has come down to the present day. So faithfully is the Hindu temple copied that the Hindu *trisul* (or trident) is not unfrequently still placed over the open gable front of the mosque." Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:186.

129 Lakshmi has given examples for these. A dispute emerged in 1878 when Mappilas built a mosque non-consensually on the land belonging to a Hindu in Walluvanad taluk. This issue was amicably solved, and the landowner executed a deed permitting the mosque's construction. Similarly, in 1911, another dispute on Mappilas' demand for a mosque and graveyard was amicably resolved when Mappilas withdrew from demand after Hindus of the locality objected. For more details, see, Lakshmi, *The Malabar Muslims*, 79.

building intended for public worship.<sup>130</sup> The administrative procedures established by this law provided opportunities for the public to raise their concerns regarding the construction of religious buildings. As the antagonistic religious identities of Hindus and Muslims heightened, tensions around the mosques and temples arose. One such tension was the construction/renewal of mosques in various parts of the district. As we discussed, in the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century, economic and social reasons of the *janmi* class contributed to these tensions. However, religious antagonisms were determinant in the tensions by the third decade of the twentieth century.

There was a request to renovate an existing *niskarapalli* to a *jamaat* mosque at Panniyankara *amsom* in Calicut.<sup>131</sup> The existing mosque was on the *janmam* land of a Muslim, and he gave the representation to the municipal chairman since prior permission was required. The revenue divisional officer on April 26, 1932 visited the place and provided his approval with two conditions. First, there should not be any

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130 Madras Government, Revenue Records District Files (Hereafter Revenue R-Dis), 1410/32, dated May 12, 1932. Bundle No. 383, Serial No. 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

131 There are different types of mosques in Malabar. It is necessary to distinguish each type and the words used to denote those types throughout this writing. When we use the term mosque, it generally means the *jamaat* mosques. *Juma* prayer (Friday prayer, which has to be done in a congregation every Friday at midday) was only held in *jamaat* mosques. Compared to other types of mosques, they are big and usually located near markets in the important centres of the locality. Burial grounds are only attached to *jamaat* mosques, though it is not necessary to have a burial ground for every mosque.

*Srambis* or *niskarappallis* are small prayer halls used only for daily prayers. It was never used for imparting religious education on the burial of the dead. It was usually placed near the paddy fields or other places where people engage in daily activities to do their daily prayers. During colonial times, most *srambis* were located in rural places, especially near agricultural fields. Lakshmi says that *niskarappallis* were owned by local Muslim families, some women as well. Lakshmi, *The Malabar Muslims*, 65.

burial ground, and second, possessions going on the road with music should not be interfered with.<sup>132</sup>

The owner of the land and the priest at the mosque submitted their affidavit saying that the mosque had existed there for fifteen years. Now, the idea was only to repair it and convert it into the *jamaat* mosque. They also assured that there would not be any burial places on this land.<sup>133</sup>

There was objection from the local Hindus to this. One Ananthanarayanan Aiyer submitted a petition to the District Collector requesting him to deny the approval for the renovation. His objection was based on the argument that this mosque was in the middle of the Hindu residences of Brahmins, Nayars, Thiyya and others.

There is absolutely not a single Mappila house close by... Moreover, the Mappila have about half a dozen mosques lining the road between Kallai and Meenchantha, and there is there for no necessity for one at this place.<sup>134</sup>

In this letter, he also mentioned that the sentiments of the Hindus are against “the present state of conduct of Mappilas”. He demanded not only the rejection of the application, but he said that the “(Hindu) residence of the locality being against the continuation - much less than any improvement to- of the *palli* (mosque)”. He wanted the removal of the existing mosque itself.

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132 Report by revenue divisional officer submitted to district collector, Malabar dated May 2, 1932. Madras Government, Revenue R-Dis 1410/32, dated May 12, 1932. Bundle Number 383, Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

133 Statements from Narimukkil Moyan Kutty, the owner of the land and Puthalath Mamu on February 19, 1932. Madras Government, Revenue R-Dis 1410/32, dated May 12, 1932., Bundle Number 383, Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

134 Letter. Ananthanarayanan to District Collector dated March 4, 1932. Madras Government. Revenue R-Dis 1410/32, dated May 12, 1932. Bundle Number 383, Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Another instance of a similar confrontation occurred in Kottali in Chirakkal taluk in Kannur. Thiyyas of this locality submitted a petition to the Collector of Malabar on February 4, 1935, against the construction of a new mosque in the locality. This mosque was constructed in a compound near a footpath, on the side of which Hindus used to conduct important functions of the Cheerumbakkavu temple festival. This petition called for the intervention of the state to stop the construction.<sup>135</sup>

This was a mass petition; 523 Hindus, mostly Thiyyas, signed it. It articulated that the construction site was close to a labour school, where no Mappilas residence existed. It was also close to a Thiyya house, where the family members performed ceremonies like *kalasam* for the temple. The petition further says:

Construction of the mosque in such a proximity thereto is evidently and doubtlessly calculated to harass the petitioners and their community by causing wanton obstruction to these ceremonies and celebrations, invariably accompanied as they are by instrumental music (including the drum-beat) which is commonly known to be quite repugnant to Muslim ideas of divine service.<sup>136</sup>

They have articulated this attempt as a part of a larger plan by Mappilas to disturb Hindu ceremonies.<sup>137</sup> The petitioners demanded to immediately stop the construction of the mosque, ‘thereby preventing the harassment at the hands of the Mappilas’.<sup>138</sup>

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135 Madras Records, Revenue R-Dis, 1625/35, dated April 16, 1935, Bundle Number 425, Serial Number 5, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

136 Petition by trustees, elders and residents in the neighbourhood of Kottali Cheeumbakkavu Temple. Revenue R-Dis, 1625/35 dated April 16, 1935, Bundle Number 425, Serial Number 5, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

137 In the same petition, an example of another attempt to construct a srambi in Muzhippilangad desam near Etakad railway station, a few distances away from the Cheerumbakkavu at that locality. Revenue R-Dis, 1625/35 dated April 16, 1935, Bundle Number 425, Serial Number 5, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

138 Petition by trustees, elders and residents in the neighbourhood of Kottali Cheeumbakkavu Temple. Revenue R-Dis, 1625/35 dated April 16, 1935, Bundle Number

On April 2, 1935, Six Mappilas, leading the mosques' construction, submitted a letter to the deputy superintendent of police (hereafter deputy superintendent of police) for North Malabar. They submitted this letter in the context of the official enquiry regarding Thiyyas' complaint about the construction of the mosque. They argued that there are 400 Muslim houses in Kakkad *desam* and eighty houses in and around the vicinity of the newly constructed mosque. They also said that there were no convenient mosques nearby.<sup>139</sup> There were only two or three Hindu houses, and even these houses were on the *janmam* properties belonging to the Muslims. There were no objections when the construction started, and they accused that the belated complaints were

due to the instigation of interested parties among Hindus living outside the locality, bent upon creating troubles for Muslims who happen to be their landlord.<sup>140</sup>

They stated that they had not breached any laws in constructing a mosque at *janmam* properties and that it was the religious duty of the Muslims to afford all the facilities for worship.

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425, Serial Number 5, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

139 They have given details of the surrounding mosques and how these mosques were inconvenient. The letter states: 'The one at the northern end of the *desam*.. is about two miles away ... the eastern side is about three miles distant and the nearest mosque is more than one mile distant. ... The mosques in the Kakkad bazaar, beside being distant from the locality, are not easily availing owing to the river separating them, which will be flooded during the whole monsoon and can be crossed only with the help of boats. ... Further, during nights ... Muslims of the locality are experiencing extreme difficulty and personal danger to go to above-mentioned mosques for worship. ... Recently, there was a case of snake bite while going to the mosque in the night'. Letter. by six Mappilas to the deputy superintendent of police, North Malabar, dated April 2, 1935. Revenue R-Dis, 1625/35 dated April 16, 1935, Bundle Number 425, Serial Number 5, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

140 Letter. by six Mappilas to the deputy superintendent of police, North Malabar, dated April 2, 1935. Revenue R-Dis, 1625/35 dated April 16, 1935, Bundle Number 425, Serial Number 5, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

The opinions of the colonial officials were polarised on this issue. The report by the joint magistrate of Thalassery stated that there were accessible mosques nearby. He stated: “It seems clear to me that the new mosque is intended solely to annoy Hindus.” He added that these points were expressed not only by the Thiyyas of the locality but also by the Thiyyas of other places who came to see him in connection with the present festival at Kannur.<sup>141</sup>

On the other hand, the deputy superintendent of police had another opinion after visiting the place. He reported that all six mosques around the site were difficult to access, especially during night time. The new mosques were amid the Mappila locality where Mappila houses predominate. Moreover, the residence of the Thiyya, which is said to be nearest to the mosque, is in the *janmam* land of a Muslim. Since his tenure is over, the *janmi* is about to evict the Thiyya as per the Malabar Tenancy Act. Once it is done, the house of Thiyya is not a grave concern. He further stated that the argument that the Thiyya being in the habit of taking *kalasam* for the last few years is a theory set up for the present agitation. He said that Mappilas were not hurrying the construction as it had been argued; instead, they were constructing it after the death of a Mappila who was going to a distant mosque for prayer by snake bite. Rejecting almost all the allegations against the construction, he opined that stopping the construction of the mosque is legally impossible. Since the Thiyya apprehensions were also to be true, the issue should be settled in a way that *mamools* (customary practices) should be preserved to prevent a breach of peace. So, the best arrangement was to permit Mappilas to construct the mosque and communicate the decision not to intervene with the prior customs. After this report, the joint magistrate

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141 Letter. Joint magistrate to District collector on 19/3/135, Revenue R-Dis, 1625/35 dated April 16, 1935, Bundle Number 425, Serial Number 5, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

sent another letter, in which he withdrew most of his earlier observations and agreed with the report of the deputy superintendent of police.<sup>142</sup>

The 1930s witnessed many contestations of this nature relating to the construction of mosques.<sup>143</sup> Nevertheless, none of these contestations turned into physical violence. Mosques were perceived as a new centre of communal troubles.<sup>144</sup> Colonial officials articulated the construction of mosques as unnecessary and a point of trouble. Such an approach was visible in most government correspondences. For instance, though the district police superintendent of Malabar did not find anything illegal about constructing a mosque at one contested site, he reported:

It is high time that authorities made the Mappilas understand that they cannot build a mosque and *srambis* all along the roadsides and later on create trouble of the sort we have been having recently.<sup>145</sup>

### **3.6 Temple Festivals, Processions and Music**

At the next level, the conflicts over the construction of the mosque extended over to issues related to temple festivals and the playing of music. Scholars have argued that no single ritualistic or religious item defined the religious conflict between Hindus

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142 Letter. deputy superintendent of police to N. Dandekar, joint magistrate of Thalassery, dated April 8, 1935. Revenue R-Dis, 1625/35 dated April 16, 1935, Bundle Number 425, Serial Number 5, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

143 There was an objection by a nearby family at Punnasseri, Calicut, on March 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3800/36 dated June 26, 1936. Bundle Number 445 Serial Number 18, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

There was an objection to constructing a mosque at Kidnagad, Sulthan Battery, in Wayanad on November 1934. Revenue R-Dis 13540/34 dated September 9, 1934. Bundle Number 404, Serial Number 19, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

144 Letter. joint magistrate of Thalassery to district collector of Malabar on 19/3/1935, Revenue R-Dis, 1625/35 dated April 16, 1935, Bundle Number 425, Serial Number 5, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

145 J. M. Green, Esquire, District Superintendent of Police, Malabar, to the District Magistrate of Malabar on June 3, 1936. Revenue R-Dis, 1625/35 dated April 16, 1935, Bundle Number 425, Serial Number 5, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

and Muslims. The markers of communal confrontations changed under historical specificities.<sup>146</sup> As we have seen, ‘playing music’ in front of the mosques evolved as an important discourse in the mosque disputes. The fulcrum of debate was no longer the right to land, but the impact on the religious life of Hindus and Muslims. Custom of procession with music for Hindus and right to have the prayer in silence for Muslims emerged as a point of debate in these discussions.

Suranjan Das’ argument in the case of Bengal, “music before mosques which hardly bothered anyone for hundred years was raised as a central point of communal dissension by the 1930s” was right for Malabar.<sup>147</sup> In traditional practices, the customary practice called *mamool* determined music playing in front of a mosque. These practices were recollected during these contestations by the colonial officials to find out possible solutions. For instance, the report of deputy superintendent of police on one of the mosque disputes stated that:

I believe that the principle on which music which is stopped, is not that the members of other denominations should be compelled to respect a Muslim place of worship, but that the *mamool* should be observed in order to prevent a breach of peace. It has happened in other places. ... I know of a mosque in Cherukunnu where, despite the pact, the Nayars, with the full consent of the Mappilas according to *mamool*, do pass with music and no objection is raised.<sup>148</sup>

Hence, communal tensions in Malabar started with the breaching of traditional understandings.

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146 Suranjan Das, ‘Communal Violence in Twentieth Century Colonial Bengal: An Analytical Framework’, *Social Scientist* 18, no. 6/7 (1990): 22.

147 Das, ‘Communal Violence in Twentieth Century Colonial Bengal’, 22.

148 Letter. deputy superintendent of police to N. Dandekar, joint magistrate of Thalassery, dated April 8, 1935. Revenue R-Dis, 1625/35 dated April 16, 1935, Bundle Number 425, Serial Number 5, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

By the third decade of the twentieth century, Muslims perceived playing music in front of mosques as a grave insult to their religion. For Hindus, it had been articulated as a shameful act and subordination to stop the music in front of the mosque. For instance, in a meeting of a large Hindu crowd at Kannur on March 21, 1936, the context of Hindu-Muslim conflict on the procession with music in front of the mosques, Rama Varrma Valiya Raja of Chirakkal said:

Can it be that Hindus do not have equal rights with the Mappilas to hold out processions on public roads? We have no one to support us. We have ourselves to take concerned action in this matter. Otherwise, it is better for us all to embrace Islam. If you wish to live as men of self-respect and in a spirit of freedom, I appeal to you to come forward in thousands.<sup>149</sup>

Hence, playing music and stopping the procession with music in front of the mosques is used as a communal programme to express antagonism or to show the strength of communities.

Colonial administration in Malabar, who had to deal with litigations and the law and order issue, prepared a pact in 1934 in which Hindu and Muslim communities around contested temples and mosques reached an agreement on the music question. As per this agreement, music had to stop at a distance of 25 yards from any mosque.<sup>150</sup> This legal/official settlement was also breached, and a series of conflicts emerged.

Stopping music in front of the mosque was articulated as a disgrace to the dignity of Hindus. This anguish emerged among the Thiyya youth in Malabar. Such

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149 Translation of newspaper report in *Mathrubhumi* on March 25, 1936. Madras Records, Law Department, 374, dated April 30, 1936. Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 12, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

150 Revenue R-Dis 3584/36, dated March 16, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

articulation created conflict in Karuvalli Kavu in Kannur on March 4, 1936. That was the day of the annual festival of the Karuvalli Kavu, a Thiyya temple near Tana, Kannur. The beginning of the festival was the taking of idols for worship in procession with drum beating and music from the house of one temple trustee. There was a *srambi* on the path of this procession. The festival of this temple was small and local affair. One week before, on February 25, 1936, there were two Thiyya processions, and they passed the *srambi* without music.<sup>151</sup> But on March 4, there was an extraordinary mobilisation of Thiyyas demanding they want to pass the *srambi* with the music.

There was a public meeting of the worshippers in the temple on March 1, 1936. This meeting instigated the emotional sentiments of the Thiyyas before the festival. P. Madhavan, a young advocate and a Congress member, delivered a provocative speech at this meeting. He exhorted the worshippers to stop all ceremonies if the police intervened or were required to stop the music in front of the mosque.<sup>152</sup> Hearing this readiness, on March 3, Mappilas of the locality petitioned that the Thiyyas were contemplating going on with the music and beating the drum against the customs in front of the mosque in Tana.<sup>153</sup> This alerted the authorities as well.

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151 Report of deputy superintend of police to the superintend of police dated March 5, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3584/36, dated March 16, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

152 P Madhavan had already written an article against the Thiyya leaders of Malabar for not being capable of asserting their power against the threats in the Mathrubhumi newspaper on 27/2/1936. Special report of the sub inspector of police, Kannur town dated March 5, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3584/36, dated March 16, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

153 Special report of the sub inspector of police, Kannur town dated March 5, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3584/36, dated March 16, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Thiyyas were determined to pass the mosque with the music. The procession, which used to be conducted between 4 pm and 5 pm, was delayed indefinitely because they had arranged an advocate to seek prior permission for the procession from the sub-magistrate of Thalassery. After he denied permission, the advocate approached the deputy superintendent of police and the joint magistrate, who were available on the spot. He first requested that the procession might be allowed to pass after 10 pm when there is no 'bang' (prayer call as per Muslim ritual). When refused, he requested for the same after midnight. This was also refused, and then he requested that the music not be stopped at 25 yards but only in front of the mosque. When this was also refused, he finally requested that the music be stopped 25 yards from the mosque, the drummers and musicians be allowed to pass first without music, go beyond 25 yards of the mosque, start their music and drumming on the other side, and then allow the processions to pass the mosque. He consulted with the Thiyyas all these times before coming up with another option. This illustrates that the Thiyyas were so desperate to break the practice. During this time, Thiyyas started gathering from various palaces.<sup>154</sup> Since it was a day of Bakr Id,<sup>155</sup> Mappilas were also gathered at the mosque.

The *kalasam* procession started around 10 pm on March 4, 1936. By that time, around 1000 Thiyyas gathered near the mosque. Around 500 followed the procession,

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154 Report of deputy superintend of police to the superintend of police dated March 5, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3584/36, dated March 16, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

155 Bakr Id or Eid al-Adha is an annual religious festival of Muslims world wide. It is inevitably connected with the sacrifices of the cows in India. Copland argued that Bakr is an Arabic word for cow and is culturally associated with cow slaughter and emerged as a significant festival connected with communal tensions in colonial India. See Ian Copland, 'What to Do about Cows? Princely versus British Approaches to a South Asian Dilemma', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 68, no. 1 (2005): 59–76.

and more Thiyyas gathered at the temple. There were about 100 Mappilas in the mosque. As the procession approached the mosque, officials intervened and asked about their intentions. The Thiyyas replied that they wanted to pass the mosque with the music. When the police were informed that such an act would breach the peace and be against customs, appropriate measures were taken. Then the procession was halted forty yards from the mosque, and drum beating continued. After the consultation with advocate, they turned back and stopped the procession altogether.<sup>156</sup>

The following day, four *uralar*<sup>157</sup> along with 528 Hindus submitted a representation in the court of the district collector. The petition was to get an order to conduct the stopped festival and procession with music. The petition was interesting. They said that every year, the procession used to happen in the same manner, and there was no objection hitherto. There were also other instances in which marriage processions and military marches crossed the mosque with music, and there were never any objection. The petition which ends with the statement that the petitioners had no grudge against the ‘Muslim brothers’, nor did they wish to offend their religious feelings. They said the police, especially the circle inspector, who was posted in front of the mosque that created the issue. It also stressed that inspector was

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156 Special report of the sub inspector of police, Kannur town dated March 5, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3584/36, dated March 16, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

157 *Uralar* is the plural of *uralan*. *Uralar* literally means the head of the village. They were the trustees of the temples. They were not the landlords. They played the role of temple trustees in managing the land and properties of the temple. For more details, see, K.M. Suresh, ‘The Temple Dependents of Early Medieval Kerala — a Case Study of Srivallabha Temple in Central Travancore’, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 64 (2003): 501–8.

a Muslim.<sup>158</sup> The district collector rejected the petition and stated it was against the customary practice and would lead to a breach of peace.<sup>159</sup>

The conflict at Karuvalli Kavu was an extension of the mosque disputes, which gained momentum at the beginning of the third decade. For example, there was a larger collectivity of Thiyyas who gathered at this locality expecting a communal issue. They came from localities such as Kottali, Azhikode, Edakat, Alavil, and other places.<sup>160</sup> The mosque dispute, which we discussed in the earlier section, took place in these first three places. Evidently, the younger generation of the Thiyyas were eager to subvert the legal and customary understanding related to mosques and temples.

Whatever happened in Karuvalli Kavu in Kannur quickly spread to other parts of Malabar. In the same month, communal issues related to the temple festivals and music upsurged in Calicut. On March 20, 1936, a procession connected with the Pinnath Kavu temples' annual festival was disturbed by police intervention due to a large Mappila crowd mobilised at Naduvattam mosque.<sup>161</sup>

The annual temple festival called *thalappoli*<sup>162</sup> celebration of the Pinnath Kavu was planned for March 20, 1936 as usual. One of the festivals' rituals was the

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158 Petition by Kaniyankandi Kunhi Raman, first *uralan* of Karuvalli Kavu, Kallankandi Koran, second *uralan*, Pampan Chandan, third *uralan*, Pandiyata Ponnayam Kandi Appa, fourth *uralan* and others (hereafter petition by *uralar* of Karuvalli Kavu) in the court of the Collector Malabar, dated March 5, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3584/36, dated March 16, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

159 Proceedings of the District Magistrate of Malabar. Revenue R-Dis 3584/36, dated March 16, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

160 Special report of the sub inspector of police, Kannur town dated March 5, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3584/36, dated March 16, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

161 Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

162 *Thalapoli* is a ritual practice where women and young girls conduct a procession with *thalam*, a plate which contains rice, flowers and lighted lamps. This usually goes with music, such as drum beats.

*kalasam*, (a procession with holy water). As per customs, this procession had to start from another temple, Karavan Kavu temple, which was about one mile away. The mosque at Naduvattam was on the way.

The procession was planned at 12 noon. It was a Friday, and Friday prayer was happening at the mosque. The previous Friday, March 13, 1936, a procession from the same temple crossed the mosque during the Friday prayer with music. Muslims said that crackers and fireworks were only used in front of the mosque, aiming to disturb the prayer. Muslims also said that the Hindus had proclaimed that another procession of the exact nature had been planned for March 20.<sup>163</sup> Then, on that day, there was a large gathering of the Mappilas at the Naduvattam mosque. Even after prayer time Mappilas stayed there to prevent the use of music in front of the mosque.<sup>164</sup>

The intervention by the police mitigated the tensions, and the Mappilas were dispersed as per police instruction. Thiyyas conducted the *kalasam* procession without music under police protection. However, the religious tensions did not subsidise. On March 23, 1936 Muslims raised another complaint that three Hindus armed with knives came near the mosque and howled when the prayer was going on.<sup>165</sup> On March 28, there was a meeting of Mappilas, and over a thousand people attended. This meeting was to condemn Chirakkal Rajas' speech at a meeting called by the collector

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163 The petition of the Mappila residents of Calicut *taluk*, Naduvattam *amsom* and *desam*, to the deputy superintendent of police, Calicut, dated March 20, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

164 Report of the deputy superintendent of police, Calicut, to the district superintendent of police, Malabar, dated March 20, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

165 Petition by Molilakath Pookoya Thangal, Pykathodi Alimammad Molla, Kalathingal Kuttiyali and five others to the district magistrate of Malabar on March 31 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

of Malabar to reconcile the troubles at Kannur.<sup>166</sup> In that speech, Chirakkal Raja was instigating the religious sentiments of Hindus and asking them not to stop the music in front of the mosques.<sup>167</sup>

Hindus then planned three processions: one marriage procession on April 1; and one religious procession on April 3; two Hindu individuals gave call for another procession with pomp and show and sent the invitation to distant places. When the authorities received this information, they intervened and ensured that no procession happened.<sup>168</sup> Yet a big Mappila crowd gathered at the mosque on April 3 for the Friday prayer. Meanwhile, the *Al-Ameen* newspaper also spread the news that there would be a procession. This time the crowd was hesitant to disperse after the prayer, and they stayed till the next morning even after request by the police.<sup>169</sup>

On that Friday Prayer on April 3, Pookkoya Thanagl of Naduvattam addressed the crowd to inform them about the *neracha* in Konthanary mosque at Valayanad. He said that the *nercha* would be celebrated on April 14 and 15. He added that Hindus would be stopping the procession in front of the temples. Foreseeing chances for

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166 Report of the inspector of police, Calicut, to the sub divisional first class magistrate, Calicut, dated April 12, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

167 Translation of newspaper report in *Mathrubhumi* on March 25, 1936. Madras Records, Law Department, 374, dated April 30, 1936. Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 12, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

168 Report of the deputy superintendent of police, Palakkad sub-division, Calicut, to the district magistrate of Malabar, Calicut, dated April 4, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

169 Report of the inspector of police, Calicut, to the sub divisional first class magistrate, Calicut, dated April 12, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

confrontation, he requested all the Mappilas to assemble for *nercha*. This speech was also reported in the *Al-Ameen* newspaper that day.<sup>170</sup>

*Nercha* at Konthanary mosque had historical significance in terms of the Hindu-Muslim conflict. The last *nercha* was celebrated more than 10 years ago. In 1915, on the occasion, there was a riot between Mappilas and Hindus where it was reported that Mappilas burned Nachery Kavvu, a Hindu temple. This case did not stand scrutiny in the session court. In 1916 and 1917, this *nercha* was organised with the procession licence. Then, the Thangal, who had to conduct the *nercha*, left for Singapore. The last *nercha* was in 1925. The present Thangal is a young man, and it is said that the *nercha* was not conducted during these years because of his minority.<sup>171</sup>

Hindus submitted a mass petition signed by 300 people to the District Collector to stop the *nercha* procession from passing the Hindu temples. Zamorin also expressed the same concern to the police. He added that in 1933, a small procession carrying the sword from Sri Valayanad Kavyu to Tali temple was stopped by a large crowd of Mappilas at Puthiya Palam Road, and the procession had been given up by then. The revival of the *nercha* at that point was only to create trouble for Hindus.<sup>172</sup> On the ground that this *nercha* would create issues, local authorities prohibited any gathering in and around the Konthanary mosque.<sup>173</sup> The Mappilas continuously fought

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170 Report of the inspector of police, Calicut, to the sub divisional first class magistrate, Calicut, dated April 12, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

171 Report of the inspector of police, Calicut, to the sub divisional first class magistrate, Calicut, dated April 12, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

172 Report of the inspector of police, Calicut, to the sub divisional first class magistrate, Calicut, dated April 12, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

173 Order under section 144 Code of Criminal Procedure, issued by the court of sub-divisional magistrate of Calicut, dated April 12, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated

legally to remove the prohibition. They articulated that this prohibition of gathering five or more people in and around the mosque denied their right to prayer.<sup>174</sup> Then the sub-divisional magistrate issued a modified order exempting the religious gathering inside the mosque.<sup>175</sup> They also sought permission for the *nercha* and argued that the anticipated violence was a Hindu construct to interrupt the religious practices of the Muslims. However, the state authorities reiterated the prohibition by the end of that month.<sup>176</sup>

At Calicut, communal tension grew along with the disputes surrounding the mosque construction or reconstruction. The Naduvattam mosque, which became the point of trouble in 1936, was a *srambi* for at least 20 years. It was converted to a *jamaat* mosque in 1934. Then, there was an attempt by the Mappilas to expand the mosque. They had purchased a plot adjacent to the mosque to use it as a burial ground. Hindu residents of the locality had submitted two petitions, one on July 14, 1934, to the district collector of Malabar and another on September 11, 1934, to the President of the Malabar District board.<sup>177</sup> Then, the officials ordered the mosque

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May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

174 Petition presented by advocate Mr T. V. Sundara Iyer on behalf of the A.V. Muthukoya Thangal and 30 others on April 12, 1936, in the court of sub-divisional magistrate of Calicut. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

175 The proceedings of the court of the sub-divisional magistrate dated April 13, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

176 The proceedings of the court of the sub-divisional magistrate dated April 30, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

177 Petition of the Pinnath Kuttan of Naduvattam to the district magistrate dated, March 22, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

authorities to stop using the plot as a burial ground. He also negated further attempts by the Mappilas to use the plot of the existing mosque as a burial ground.<sup>178</sup>

Unlike Kannur, militant Mappila mobilisation in these contestations was huge in Calicut. The presence of the *Al-Amin* newspaper was also a determinant in Mappilas' mobilisation. Both Hindus and Muslims here ranged against each other. The articulation of the issue was not against the state, but pointed against the communities. Both communities tried to bring the state on their side.

The contestation over the spaces started with disputes over the construction of mosques. In the 1930s, it was not about land alienation but the notion that two religious groups cannot coexist. Thiyyas, who were hitherto considered a caste group, perceived themselves as placed within the Hindu community. This idea of belonging to the larger Hindu community was achieved through placing themselves in opposition to Muslims. Huge processions with music had established itself as a successful attempt in creating Hindu solidarity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bal Ganadhar Tilak's innovation of public celebration of the Ganesh festival brought Brahmin and non-Brahmin Hindus together.<sup>179</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, musical procession provided a cultural and political unity among Hindus, but against Muslims.<sup>180</sup> More or less, this was repeating in Malabar in the 1930s.

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178 Report of the inspector of police, Calicut, to the sub divisional first class magistrate, Calicut, dated April 12, 1936. Revenue R-Dis 3799/36, dated May 21, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 2, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

179 Raminder Kaur, *Performative Politics and the Cultures of Hinduism: Public Uses of Religion in Western India* (Delhi, 2003), 59–63.

180 Shabnum Tejani, 'Music, Mosques and Custom: Local Conflict and "Communalism" in a Maharashtrian Weaving Town, 1893–1894', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 30, no. 2 (2007): 229, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856400701499227>.

Scholars have argued that in the north and central parts of India, the lower castes' assertion of a militant Hinduism in the early twentieth century was not limited to religious commitment. Nevertheless, it was part of their attempt to establish themselves in higher socio-political and economic positions.<sup>181</sup> Similarly, in Malabar, the assertion of a much more militant religious identity by the Thiyyas, especially after the middle of the 1930s, was happening in the context of their aspiration for a better social position. The new constitutional developments, such as the Government of India Act 1919 and 1935, provided opportunities in electoral politics. The younger generation of Thiyyas were looking for a wider community affiliation against the older elites, who were still placing themselves in their community identity.<sup>182</sup> Congress initiated the temple entry movement and sought to widen its base. In this context, younger Thiyyas looking for an extended affiliation in cultural and political spheres became the front-runners in the communal troubles in Malabar.

However, an important aspect is that such larger mobilisations never turned into mass violence anywhere in Malabar. On the contrary, such tensions in many other parts of India had culminated in physical atrocities against both communities and private properties.<sup>183</sup> In Malabar, the expression of religious militancy was aimed at asserting communal identities. It was not to any considerable extent aimed at destroying the other community. For instance, in his heated speech at Kannur, after

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181 For discussion on militant religious assertion by *shudras* in North India, see Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge, 2001).

For discussion on the political economy of assertion of Salis in Maharashtra, see Tejani, 'Music, Mosques and Custom'.

182 Menon, *Becoming 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'*, 20.

183 For instance, see Julian Anthony Lynch, 'Music and Communal Violence in Colonial South Asia', *Ethnomusicology Review* 17 (2012): 3; Das, 'Communal Violence in Twentieth Century Colonial Bengal', 23–24.

vehemently arguing for the Hindu consolidation against the Muslims, the Raja of Chirakkal said:

You should not misunderstand me as being hostile to the Muslim brothers. I have many Mappila Tenants. I have never, till now, denied them permission to build mosques. Muslims know their religion, but Hindus don't. It is a sign of degeneration.<sup>184</sup>

Similarly, the petition of *uralar* in relation to the Karuvalli Kavu also said that they had no grudge against their Muslim brothers, nor did they want to offend their religious feelings. "What the petitioners want is a peaceful procession of their deity to the temple with all the religious rights prescribed by the Hindu religion and age-long custom."<sup>185</sup> In the colonial practices, marching the army with the musical band was an expression of territorial control. Such practices were referred to in these discussions. In that way, for Hindus, it can also be an assertion of territorial control over their competitors. As Neil Whitehead suggests, 'violence can be part of the expression and creation of identity and group organisation.'<sup>186</sup>

There could be another aspect for the comparatively fewer physical conflicts. By this time, the public sphere of Malabar had developed in a way that different sections of society were capable of appropriately using its possibilities. Mappilas were entirely incorporated into the public sphere. Nayars and Thiyyas had considerable dominance over the sphere. Hence, all the concerned parties in these contestations

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184 Translation of newspaper report in *Mathrubhumi* on March 25, 1936. G. O. Number 374, dated April 30, 1936. Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 12, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

185 Petition by *Uralans* of Karivalli Kavu to the District Collector of Malabar dated March 5, 1936, Revenue R-Dis 3584/36, dated March 16, 1936. Bundle Number 438 Serial Number 1, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

186 Neil L. Whitehead and Begoña Aretxaga, eds, *Violence* (Santa Fe, NM, 2004), 59.

brought their conflicts into the public sphere and sought constitutional or administrative remedies. In his speech, Chirakkal Raja said that it was high time Hindus united and carried on a constitutional agitation to safeguard their rights. He also said, “Though we have no arms to fight with, we shall fight with our pen and intellect.”<sup>187</sup> This was mainly the case with Mappilas as well. In contrast with the argument of Suranjan Das that in Bengal ‘fusion of communal with nationalist and class mode of consciousness culminated in relatively more organised and overtly communal riots.’<sup>188</sup> in Malabar, such a dynamic reduced the intensity of the communal troubles. The intervention of the state and the search for administrative solutions further reduced the use of violence in these contestations.

### **3.7 Religion and Everyday Violence**

Apart from the conflicts over strictly religious symbols, religious identity constituted an important aspect of interpersonal violence in those decades. Religious identity was invoked not only when their religious beliefs and icons were threatened but also during everyday conflicts. Individuals in conflicts perceived their identity and the identity of the other in terms of religion. The associations and the group solidarity were also channelled along religious lines. Of course, these were not blindfolded; solidarities based on other identities also existed. The argument here is that there was an increasing tendency among the individuals in conflict to perceive it in terms of religious identities.

By the beginning of the 1930s, Malabar rebellion prisoners had started being released from jails and returned to their places. But the spaces they returned to did not

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187 Translation of newspaper report in *Mathrubhumi* on March 25, 1936. G. O. Number 374, dated April 30, 1936. Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 12, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

188 Das, ‘Communal Violence in Twentieth Century Colonial Bengal’, 23.

stay the same. Colonial articulations and the nationalist narratives of the rebellion had coloured the mindscapes. Both for the Mappilas and for the Hindus, it was a communal issue by then. Conflicts between the returned prisoners and the Hindus of the locality were one of the significant aspects of interpersonal violence, with religious identity playing an important aspect. A careful analysis of various violent incidents reveals this.

On March 30, 1931, a conflict occurred between a Mappila convicted during the Malabar rebellion and one Gopalan Nayar and others. The incident is as follows. Athan was a Mappila, and he was convicted in the Malabar rebellion. When he was away, Gopalan Nayar, a police constable, acquired land belonging to Athan in a court auction and executed the decree. Athan was determined that the Gopalan Nayar should not have peaceful possession of the property, and he created trouble by stealing coconuts.<sup>189</sup> On the day of the incident, while the toddy tapper was collecting toddy from a coconut tree, Athan stopped it. Later, the toddy tapper came again with the escort of Gopalan Nayar (and others). A fight broke out when Athan again attempted to stop him. Gopalan Nayar and others were wounded, and as a result of this fight, Athan succumbed to death the next day.

The incident occurred at a place where “since the time of rebellion when there was looting of Hindu houses in the vicinity (and) there has been the bad blood between Hindus and Mappilas.”<sup>190</sup> The prosecution case was weak, and the court had to acquit the accused. Along with Gopalan Nayar, there were two other accused, and

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189 Gopalan Nayar had submitted a complaint to the Sub-inspector of Kottakkal on March 2, 1931. On the investigation, the inspector concluded that charging Athan with this case was too trivial. Session case number 32, Judgement of session court of south Malabar dated July 20, 1931. Malabar Collectorate Files, 662, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

190 Session case number 32, Judgement of session court of south Malabar dated July 20, 1931. Malabar Collectorate Files, 662, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

both of them were Mappilas. The first accused is Kunhammed, to whom Gopalan Nayar had sub-let the land. Mother of Athan, who was also wounded when she tried to stop the fight, gave a statement which was contradictory to the prosecution case.

The court observed that:

conversely, she (Kathiyumma, the mother of Athan) stated that the accused had cut her son, which is not the case for the prosecution at all. She equally implicated another man, Appu Nayar, with the accused, but that is also directly opposed to the case now presented.<sup>191</sup>

So, this makes it complicated to rely upon the prosecution case as presented to the court without compromising factual veracity.

The *adhikari* stated that he learned about the incident at about noon and heard that ‘there was a fight between Athan on one side and Gopalan Nayar and others on the other side’.<sup>192</sup> In this fight, only three people were injured: Athan, his mother and Gopalan Nayar. The injuries of Athan were fatal, and Gopalan Nayar had severe injuries on the shoulder, hand and leg. It would be safe to assume that a fight broke out between the Gopalan Nayar and Athan, and his mother got wounded when she tried to stop the fight. There were also others involved in the fight, most probably on the side of the *janmi*.

The prosecution and defence witnesses were also divided on the religious line. Apart from the officials, all the witnesses produced by the prosecution were Mappilas. The two witnesses for the defence were Hindus from the Nayar caste.<sup>193</sup> Among the

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191 Session case number 32, Judgement of session court of south Malabar dated July 20, 1931. Malabar Collectorate Files, 662, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

192 Session case number 32, Judgement of session court of south Malabar dated July 20, 1931. Malabar Collectorate Files, 662, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

193 Session case number 32, Judgement of session court of south Malabar dated July 20, 1931. Malabar Collectorate Files, 662, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

two Mappilas accused, one was not in the picture, and the other was a tenant of Gopalan Nayar. It would also be safe to assume that the presence of two Mappilas accused of aiding Gopalan Nayar weakened the case.<sup>194</sup> Apart from these two exceptions, all other witnesses were divided along the religious line. Court also clearly states that there is siding on the religious line.<sup>195</sup> Hence, the conflict between individuals invoked religious identity.

Another incident occurred at Parappanangadi. Here, one Mappila rebellion convict, Vakkandathil Marakkarutty, attempted to murder one Kuttiparambath Govindankutty Nayar. In this incident, he also attacked one Velayudhan, who tried to intervene in the fight. The incident happened on January 1, 1929, on a public road.

Govindankutty Nayar was from a big landowning family of Parappanangadi. During the rebellion, he complained against the present accused and others that they had committed dacoity in his house. Marakkarutty was not arrested until 1926. Then, he was arrested and sentenced to imprisonment for one year. By the end of the following year, he had been released from jail. Since then, he had been saying that he would kill Govindankutty Nayar for having sent him to jail. In the middle of December, he attacked Govindankutty Nayar, and then also he said that it was not enough: "You are the man who sent me to jail. You must be put an end to; I will Kill you".<sup>196</sup> On January 1, they met on a public road, and another fight broke out. Marakkarutty stabbed Govindankutty Nayar with a knife. The Thiyyas of the locality

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194 Session case number 32, Judgement of session court of south Malabar dated July 20, 1931. Malabar Collectorate Files, 662, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

195 Session case number 32, Judgement of session court of south Malabar dated July 20, 1931. Malabar Collectorate Files, 662, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

196 Session Case no. 18 of 1929, In the court of sessions of the south Malabar division on April 4, 1929. Malabar Collectorate Files 655. Regional Archives Kozhikode

interfered and took him and the Govindankutty to the police station along with the knife.

Marakkarutty was also in confrontation with another dominant landowning family of the locality, the Achampat family, since he had been released from jail. This was a Muslim family, and the *adhikari* of the village belonged to that family. At the beginning of November 1928, he had filed a suit against that family for cutting down a tree from his land. Since then, there has been a threat to his life from this family. On November 10, he petitioned the sub-divisional magistrate, Malappuram, alleging that Achampat men and some hangers-on were planning to attack him and asking that they might be warned. On November 18, he submitted another petition to the sub-collector, Malappuram, complaining that the same family was blocking the way to his house.<sup>197</sup>

Marakkarutty was well into the awareness of colonial legality and knew how to adjudicate the contesting issues. However, there is a difference in how he dealt with both families. Apart from the religious angle, there would be another reason behind this differential treatment. The fight he had with Govindankutty Nayar was about revenge for sending him to jail. On the other hand, with the Achambat family, he was fighting for a difference of opinion. Moreover, he was a tenant in the land belonging to that family.

Govindankutty Nayar also did not approach the authority in the context of threat against him by Marakkarutty. He did not even complain about the first assault. Govindankutty Nayar said in the court that he did not take the threats seriously. When

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197 Session Case no. 18 of 1929, In the court of sessions of the south Malabar division on April 4, 1929. Malabar Collectorate Files 655. Regional Archives Kozhikode

he was attacked, he did not like to admit publicly that a Mappila had struck him, a Nayar of some standing.<sup>198</sup>

Another example of interpersonal violence occurred at Vengery Bazar in Calicut. This was a site of the Thiyya Muslim conflict in the 1930s. It was a small town with few shops owned mainly by the Muslims. Muslim settlements were nearer to these local markets. There were also Thiyyas around the place. There was a minor Muslim-Thiyya conflict in 1928. Such small incidents continued, and it culminated in the murder of a Thiyya in 1930.

On February 16, 1930, there was a quarrel between Mammad Koya, one Mappila, and Rarichan, a Thiyya. The next day, forenoon, Rarichan was met with the same Mappila, and another fight broke out. Avaran Koya, Mappilas' brother, joined during this fight, and both attacked Rarichan. A Nayar intervened in the fight, and he made peace, and both parties went home.

The incident led to the fatality that occurred on the same day evening. There were two sides to this event. The narration of the Thiyyas as produced by the prosecution in the court is as follows. Rarichan and his brother Unnirikutty came from Calicut and had rice in two carts.<sup>199</sup> Parangodan, an employee of Rarichan, was driving his cart. When they reached the front of the Mammad Koya shop at Vengeri Bazar, he and five other Mappilas attacked him. Other Mappilas surrounded Unnirikutty to ensure he did not move or help his brother. When four Mappilas started beating Rarichan with 'beg of the yoke, stout piece of wood, and long and very heavy

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198 Session Case no. 18 of 1929, In the court of sessions of the south Malabar division on April 4, 1929. Malabar Collectorate Files 655. Regional Archives Kozhikode

199 Prosecution said that Rarichan joined the carts in between to help by pushing the cart up the hill between Vengei and Kakkad. Case no. 14 of 1930 in the court of sessions of South Malabar division. Judgement dated April 3, 1930. Malabar Collectorate Files 658, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

iron bolt,' Parangodan unyoked the bulls from the cart and tethered them and ran to Imbichi's house. Imbichi, who was the father of Rarichan and Unnirikutty, ran to the spot crying, 'Do not kill my son'. Another Thiyya, Kunhukuttan, who happened to be at his house, followed him to the fight. When he tried to intervene in the fight, four Mappilas turned towards him.<sup>200</sup>

Meanwhile, Mammad Koya sent one person to fetch his elder brother, Avaran Koya, from Kakkodi Bazar. When informed about the fight, he took the bus to the spot. As soon as the bus got to where the fight was happening, he jumped from the bus and went straight to Imbichi and gave him a fatal stab with the knife.

The narration by the Mappilas, as presented by the defence in the case, is as follows. Imbichi, Rarichan, Unnirikutty, Parangodan, Kunhikuttan and Chandan came to the shop of Mammad Koya, where his brother Avaran Koya was also present and attacked them. Another Mappila who was accused in the case also joined in the fight. Mappilas and Thiyyas were assembled, and the affair became a free fight between Mappilas and Thiyyas. In this fight, Mammad Koya was knocked down. Imbichi was stabbed by an unknown person. When it was seen that Imbichi had a severe wound, people dispersed, and the fight stopped.

In these two versions, the South Malabar session court found that the defence version is probable due to various factors. In the 1930s, the fights were happening between Hindus and Muslims, and the mobilisations happened accordingly. In this case, the sessions' judge observed that when the fight started, an "old feeling between Mappila and Thiyya was awakened and that the Mappilas and the Thiyyas who

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200 Case no. 14 of 1930 in the court of sessions of South Malabar division. Judgement dated April 3, 1930. Malabar Collectorate Files 658, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

gathered joined the fight.”<sup>201</sup> He also stated that “in a case of this kind, in which caste and religious feelings have been aroused, one must be guided mainly by the probabilities.”<sup>202</sup> Witnesses for prosecution and defence were presented on religious lines.

Religion was not central to any of these incidents. Inter personal differences or commercial interests led to these conflicts. However, religious identities were invoked instantly in these conflicts. Solidarities were forged on religious lines. Another aspect of the interpersonal violence in the 1930s was that it tended to settle antagonisms without state interference. Violence was perceived as the only means to address these issues.

### **Taking Stock**

As in the case of the caste system, colonial period marked a transitional period in religious identities and Hindu-Muslim relations. Different religious identities co-existed with religious practices as they were incorporated into the traditional ritual networks. Though the boundaries of religious communities were often blurred, internal and external hierarchies existed in pre-colonial Malabar. Political instabilities often transformed the character of the non-Hindu religious communities. For instance, Bayly traced the emergence of a Syrian Christian warrior group in Travancore as early as the fifteenth century, sanctioned by “Hindu chiefs as members of a ritually superior caste group equivalent in status to the upper Nayar warrior group.”<sup>203</sup> While this was

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201 Case no. 14 of 1930 in the court of sessions of South Malabar division. Judgement dated April 3, 1930. Malabar Collectorate Files 658, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

202 Case no. 14 of 1930 in the court of sessions of South Malabar division. Judgement dated April 3, 1930. Malabar Collectorate Files 658, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

203 Susan Bayly, ‘Hindu Kingship and the Origin of Community: Religion, State and Society in Kerala, 1750–1850’, *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 2 (1984): 177–213, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00014402>.

the result of internal dynamics in land relations, where powerful *naduvazhis* threatened the authority of the king, an external threat from Portuguese colonialism resulted in the formation of a warrior community known as the *Marakkar* in Malabar. The Portuguese invasion had a profound impact on Malabar society; however, Hindu-Muslim relations did not undergo significant changes.

The upper-caste *janmis*, who returned after the British ascended to political power in Malabar, had by then developed a religious antagonism with the Mappilas. They perceived the Mappilas as supporters of the Mysorean rulers, who had caused them great misery. Mappila tenants, already vulnerable due to changes in land relations, now also faced religious antagonism. This combination of agrarian and religious tensions contributed to the nineteenth-century revolts of the Mappila peasantry. Hindu-Muslim relations further deteriorated after the 1921 Rebellion. Narratives of Mappila atrocities, circulated both by colonial officials and nationalist leaders, deepened the divide. The decades following the Malabar rebellion witnessed a significant transformation in the religious identities among the Hindus and Mappila Muslims. Mappilas exhibited ambivalence in their political affiliation primarily due to the peculiar characteristics of the Congress, which showed reluctance in organising Mappilas:

The situation among Malabar Muslims at present is that there are three parties or at least followers of three policies: those who have joined or who favour joining the Congress unconditionally, those who adhere to Mr Jinnah and the Muslim League and those who are anxious to stand apart from both of these parties as independent loyalists. The second of these parties is probably at its strongest in Malabar.<sup>204</sup>

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204 Fortnightly Reports for second half of July 1937. Indian Office Records IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

Even those Mappilas who joined the Congress acted as a separate block representing the Muslim interests within the Congress. In this contest, the incorporation of Mappilas into the public sphere was communal in nature and antagonistic with the Hindus.

Conversely, in the post-rebellion era, a tendency emerged to “create a new Hindu identity” rather than using the existing one.<sup>205</sup> The Nayers in the Congress constantly attempted to forge a larger Hindu solidarity. The young Thiyyas realised the necessity of asserting Hindu religious identity and political participation to leverage socio-economic and political opportunities. The appropriation of a broader Hindu identity by Thiyyas played a significant role in the communal conflicts of the 1930s. In the public sphere, the Hindu solidarity was not achieved through the conception of equality among Hindus, but rather through the conception of a community in opposition to the Mappilas.

According to Gupta, communalism emerged not because of the colonialism’s ‘encroachment to invalidate the indigenous social relations’ as Panday argued.<sup>206</sup> The colonial state had proclaimed neutrality towards the various religions among the native communities.<sup>207</sup> New opportunities in administration and electoral politics opened up the possibilities of asserting religious identities, thus sparking contestations with communal meanings.

It was in this context that communal mobilisations occurred surrounding the construction/renovation/expansion of mosques in 1930s. By the mid-1930s, communal conflicts were intensified. Musical processions related to the temple

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205 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 80.

206 Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, 206.

207 Gupta, ‘Communalism and Nationalism in Colonial India’.

festivals emerged as a new point of contestation. In Karuvalli Kavu in Kannur and Pinnathu Kavu in Calicut, the Hindu mobilisation was largely led by younger Thiyyas, who were then seeking a broader religious identity. When the larger religious polarisation and mobilisation occurred on issues related to the religious institutions, no fatal incidents of violence occurred. Violence was used as an expression of the new group affiliations and an attempt to control contested spaces.

In everyday life, religious identities were spontaneously invoked during interpersonal conflicts. These conflicts did not typically arise from tensions related to religious sentiments and institutions. Nevertheless, solidarities were formed on religious lines. Such conflicts happened in the civil society where the state's intervention was absent, and they often resulted in fatal physical violence. The reasons and class characteristics of these violent incidents resembled those of the nineteenth-century Mappila insurgencies. However, in post-rebellion Malabar, such conflict did not convert or manifest on an extended scale. Although solidarities emerged along religious lines, religious institutions, such as mosques or religious leaders, did not push for a stake in them. Hence, violence remained mostly at an individual level.

Contestations over religious spaces and festivals declined after 1937. Peasant and workers' struggles were now emerging with new vocabularies. Religion, as an antagonistic entity, appeared in the early stages of these new struggles but waned quickly enough.

## Chapter 4

### Peasant Issues and Agitations

In the history of colonial India, peasants constituted one of the prominent categories which posed violent and militant protests and revolts. Precisely because of its diverse nature in terms of mobilisation, demands and method of agitation, the historiography of the Indian peasant movement is rich and vast. By the 1970s, the historiography of the peasant movement in colonial India had established itself as an important domain, and large number of studies had emerged.<sup>1</sup> Many of those studies try to draw the parallels between Indian peasantry and other Western and non-Western peasantry, especially where peasant revolutions took historical significance.<sup>2</sup> The subaltern historiography strictly scrutinised the peasant consciousness and its role in the national movement. The impact of the traditional socio-cultural affiliations, such as caste, religion, and the role of myths, in the ideological orientation of the peasant protests has been brought to light by these studies.<sup>3</sup> Subaltern studies, While challenging spontaneous or spasmodic nature of the outrages by the Indian peasantry, ended up in the stereotyping of the peasant consciousness in the insurgencies a derivative of pre-modern associations and legitimacies. Sarkar argued that, protesting workers who were recruited from the peasantry had little to fall back on other than

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1 Mridula Mukherjee, 'Peasant Resistance and Peasant Consciousness in Colonial India: "Subalterns" and Beyond', *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, no. 41 (1988): 2109.

2 For instance see, Hamza Alavi, 'Peasants And Revolution', *Socialist Register* 2 (1965); Kathleen Gough, 'Peasant Resistance and Revolt in South India', *Pacific Affairs* 41, no. 4 (1968): 526, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2754563>.

3 For a few examples, see, Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983); Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (New Delhi, 2006); David Arnold, 'Islam, the Mappilas and Peasant Revolt in Malabar', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 9, no. 4 (1982): 255–65.

‘sectional and divisive’ traditional associations with “kinship, region, caste, or religion.”<sup>4</sup> Arnold, looking at the industrial protests in South India, argued that the Indian workers who emerged from the peasantry carried their “reactive forms of protests” which were always oriented along pre-modern solidarities.<sup>5</sup> An attempt to locate the necessary transformation of peasant consciousness is lacking in the historiography of peasant movements. The endeavour to understand such transformation in peasant consciousness and legitimacy by Mukherjee also ended up pinning the blame on Indian communist leadership which failed in “establishing new, modern notions of legitimacy” among the peasantry.<sup>6</sup>

Peasants do not constitute a homogeneous category. There is hierarchy and stratification among peasants with socio-economic connotations. Scholarship on peasant history in India and elsewhere has made a careful distinction between rich, middle, and poor peasants. The rich peasants are characterised by high social status and extensive use of hired labour, whereas the middle peasant mainly uses family labour. A poor peasant is the one who does not hold enough land to absorb his labour.<sup>7</sup> Looking at the role of peasants in China and Russia, Alavi argues that it was the middle peasant who had the revolutionary potential. The poor peasant was only drawn to the protest movements by the middle peasantry. But in armed peasant movement in Telangana and *tebhaga* movement in Bengal, it was the poor peasantry who constituted the mass base of the movement, and he argues that it was the alienation of

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4 Sumit Sarkar, *‘Popular’ Movements and ‘Middle Class’ Leadership in Late Colonial India: Perspectives and Problems of a ‘History from Below’* (Calcutta, 1983), 27.

5 David Arnold, ‘Industrial Violence in Colonial India’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 2 (1980): 254.

6 Mridula Mukherjee, *Peasants in India’s Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory* (New Delhi, 2004), 500.

7 Irfan Habib, ‘The Peasant in Indian History’, *Social Scientist* 11, no. 3 (1983): 21.

the middle peasantry from the movement which led to its failure.<sup>8</sup> Scholars like Eric Wolf also argued the potential of the middle peasantry.<sup>9</sup>

However, Kathleen Gough has argued that the poor peasants and agricultural workers constituted the base of the revolutionary movements in South India.<sup>10</sup> The study about the peasant movement in India by Dhanagare rejects the claim of a revolutionary middle peasantry. He argues that the “notion of a structural independence of the middle peasantry which implies that it is self-reliant, free from market forces, and capable of militant political action” is a mythical construct.<sup>11</sup> The middle peasantry in India was weak in its transformative potential due to its sociological and historical specificities. They were a transitional and fluid category, and their interest in the land was very diverse.<sup>12</sup>

This chapter tries to understand the dynamics of protest in the peasant movements in Malabar after 1935. By then peasants began to adopt certain forms of modern political organisation. The newly emerging socialist and communist ideas influenced the peasantry. This chapter argues that the peasant consciousness underwent radical transformation during this period.

#### **4.1 Malabar Peasants in the Early Nineteenth Century**

When the British established their political power in Malabar in 1792, the first two things they did were to reinstate the *janmis* and to start the revenue collection. The revenue system that the East India Company implemented in Malabar was the

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8 Alavi, ‘Peasants And Revolution’.

9 Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

10 Gough, ‘Peasant Resistance and Revolt’.

11 Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950*, 222.

12 Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950*, 221.

*ryotwari* system. However, this system differed from the regular *ryotwari* settlements of the Madras presidency. In regular *ryotwari* system, which emerged as an alternative to the permanent settlement in Bengal, settlements were made with the tenants to avoid intermediaries. The government received revenue based on the assessment of land under cultivation. Unlike the other revenue settlements, the *ryotwari* system was open for upward revenue revision. The British administration modified this system in Malabar and also in South Canara due to the peculiar land tenures.<sup>13</sup> Here, the existence of the *janmi* was recognised between the state and cultivator “in the theoretical distribution of the produce” and rates of assessments were determined accordingly.<sup>14</sup> In Malabar, *janmi* was identified as the owner of the land, yet the cultivator was also taken into consideration when the share of the state was decided.

The company fixed the revenue as per the assessment of Tipu Sultan. The Mysorean assessment regarding revenue collection was not reliable. For instance, Mr Graeme, the special commissioner of Malabar in 1822, found that the revenue collected by the Mysorean rulers in South Malabar varied from one-tenth to one-third.<sup>15</sup> The joint commissioners in 1792-93 calculated the revenue responsibility based on this wrong assessment.<sup>16</sup> The British did not attempt to introduce a new

13 Nilmani Mukharjee, *The Ryotwari System in Madras, 1792-1827* (Calcutta, 1962), xvii.

14 C. A. Innes, *Madras District Gazetteers, Malabar*, ed. F. B. Evans (Madras, 1933), 1:304.

15 Innes, *Madras District Gazetteers, Malabar*, 1:325.

16 British in Malabar obtained this information about the Arshad Beg Khans' settlement from one Brahmin employee of the Mysorean administration. “This statement gave the number of paras of seeds sown in South Malabar that year, the out-turn multiple, the gross produce and the assessment thereon. It also shows the number of productive trees, gross produce, and assessment. It also showed the number of productive trees of each kind (coconut, arecanut, jack and pepper trees) and the gross assessment on them. The joint commissioners, therefore divided the gross assessment on the wet lands and on each kind of garden produce by the total number of paras of seeds and the total number of productive trees, respectively, and therefrom deduced a fixed money rate for each para of seed and each kind of bearing trees, and assumed that the Mysorean assessment had

revenue collection system. Their focus was on realising the maximum demand fixed by the Mysorean rulers. Earlier, they relied upon the local chieftains to collect revenue from the *janmis* of their territory. However, the local chieftains could not meet the revenue expectations of the British due to the deteriorating agrarian conditions and the overestimation of the revenue. The realised revenue was short by 25 per cent of the estimation.<sup>17</sup> The East India Company did not understand that reality behind the shortage in the collected revenue and assumed that it was due to the incompatibility of the local chieftains. This led to a decision by the Company in 1800 to collect revenue directly.<sup>18</sup>

The revenue demand throughout the nineteenth century remained between 16 and 18 lakhs. In the settlement of 1900, there was an increase of rupees 13,53,890, which was 77 per cent in the total revenue.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, by 1900 the wet and garden land cultivation had increased by only 34 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively.<sup>20</sup>

Let us look at the various agrarian classes and how did the colonial policies impacted their socio-economic condition in nineteenth century colonial Malabar. There were *janmis*, *kanakkars*, *verumpattakkar* and agricultural labourers. *Janmis* emerged as the private owners of the land as a result of colonial policy in the

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proceeded on fixed principles.” Innes, *Madras District Gazetteers, Malabar*, 1:324.

17 John Briggs, *The Present Land-Tax in India Considered as a Measure of Finance In Order to Show Its Effects on the Government and the People of That Country, and on the Commerce of Great Britain. In Three Parts* (London, 1830), 278.

18 K. N. Panikkar, ‘Agrarian Legislation and Social Classes: A Case Study of Malabar’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 13, no. 21 (1978): 880.

19 Innes, *Madras District Gazetteers, Malabar*, 1:347.

20 K. N. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar, 1836-1921* (Delhi, 1989), 6.

nineteenth century. A few families held a significant portion of the land as the *janmam* property in Malabar. As K. N. Panikkar explains, 32 *janmis* held almost 51 per cent of the total cultivated land in 1920-21.<sup>21</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, *kanakkar* emerged as a powerful social group with considerable economic consolidation and socio-political powers as the native members of the bureaucracy of the colonial administration. The British revenue system had recognised and legalised these intermediary tenancies. Panikkar argues that intermediary tenants appropriated almost 70 to 75 per cent of the crops, where the rest was divided between the *janmis* and cultivators. This accumulation of a large amount of rent led to the concentration of land among the level of intermediary tenants as well, which, on the other hand, pushed the small *kanakkar* into the position of the tenant -at- will.<sup>22</sup> Rich tenants also bought lands and became the *janmis* of small land holdings and leased their lands to small *kanakkar* while taking lands from the big *janmis* as a lease.<sup>23</sup> The emergence of the 'middle class' from this intermediary section and their domination in the public sphere and political representative institutions in the twentieth century further extended their powers. Dhanagare's argument about the middle peasantry in colonial India as a transitional and fluid category, with diverse interests in the land, was also valid for the middle peasant in Malabar.<sup>24</sup> In this process, the condition of the *verumpattam* tenants and the agricultural labourer worsened.

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21 Looking at the data from the Malabar tenancy Committee report 1929, he calculated that the 32 *janmis* held 6,28,921.30 acres out of the 1,229,216.88 total cultivated area. See, Panikkar, 'Agrarian Legislation and Social Classes', 881.

22 Panikkar, 'Agrarian Legislation and Social Classes', 881.

23 Panikkar, 'Agrarian Legislation and Social Classes', 881.

24 D. N. Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950* (Delhi, 1991), 221.

## 4.2 Peasant Discontent and Dynamics of Violence

Until the third decade of the twentieth century, peasant discontent manifested in two distinct ways. The lower peasantry, especially *verumpattam* tenants and agricultural labourers, primarily the Mappila peasants, openly engaged in violent conflicts with the *janmis* and colonial state to express their discontent. On the other hand, intermediary *kanakkar*, especially from the Nayar caste, resorted to administrative resolutions by influencing the state through the opportunities of the public sphere and legal and political institutions. The position of these two social classes in the agrarian structure and in the colonial administrative sphere determined the mode of agitation.

The majority of Mappila agriculturists were cultivating tenants or landless labourers.<sup>25</sup> There was a substantial increase in the Mappila population in the Malabar owing to the religious conversion from the dalit castes such as Cherumar, Pulayar, Vettuvar and Mukkuvars.<sup>26</sup> During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mappilas lagged in education compared to other social groups. The majority of Muslims took only religious education provided from the *madrasas*. Very few Mappilas sought any English education.<sup>27</sup> The first Mappila who graduated in bachelor's degree from Malabar was just before World War I.<sup>28</sup> The British attitude

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25 There were only eight land-owning Mappilas among the 103 principal *janmis* called by the district collector in 1803. "All others except one Thiyya were upper caste Hindus." The census report of 1881 states that there were only 12 Mappilas among 829 principal *janmis* holding more than 100 pieces of land in an *amsom*. Data provided in Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 53.

26 Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 52.

27 K. N. Panikkar says that in 1911, only 486 Mappilas were literate in English compared to 5,895 Nayars and 2897 Thiyyas. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 54.

28 It was B. Poker Sahib of Kannur who graduated in B. A degree. Roland E. Miller, *Mappila Muslim Culture: How a Historic Muslim Community in India Has Blended Tradition and Modernity* (Albany, 2015), 37.

towards Mappilas as the ‘troublesome rebels,’ and the criminalisation of the community<sup>29</sup> further alienated these sections from administrative positions. A professional middle class with a Western education, who could negotiate with the colonial state, emerged very late among the Mappilas. In this context, the Mappila peasantry expressed their discontent with the excessive land revenues and repressive policies through the forms of violent insurgencies. Religion and associated institutions had provided ideology and leadership for these violent insurgencies.

The Mappila peasant insurgencies always had the same pattern: “a group of Mappila youth attacking a Brahmin *janmi*, a Nayar official, or a *janmis*’ servant,” and ended with the rebels being shot by the police or troops.<sup>30</sup> All nineteenth-century violent peasant insurgencies except one in 1852 occurred in the Eranad and Valluvanad *taluks* of South Malabar, where the Mappila population was 60 per cent and 35 per cent, respectively.<sup>31</sup>

The earliest recorded incidents of the disturbances by the Mappilas were on November 26, 1836, at Pandallur in Manjeri, where one Mappila stabbed and killed an astrologer and three others. He was shot by the police two days later.<sup>32</sup> During this period, most incidents were attacks against the *janmis* or village officials by individuals or small groups. The exact occupation of the Mappilas was not available in the accounts provided by Logan. However, as per the social settings and context, it would be fair to assume they would be the cultivating tenants or landless

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29 Santhosh Abraham, ‘Constructing the “Extraordinary Criminals”: Mappila Muslims and Legal Encounters in Early British Colonial Malabar’, *Journal of World History* 25, no. 2/3 (2014): 373–95.

30 Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950*, 61.

31 Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 65.

32 William Logan, *Malabar Manual* (Madras, 1887), 1:55--558.

agriculturalists. For instance, on April 15, 1837, a Brahmin *janmi* was attacked by a Mappila tenant in Eranad *taluk*, and he was killed in the firing of the *taluk* police. Two Mappilas of Pallippuram in Valluvanad *taluk* had killed one Raman (a Nayar landlord?) and burned a temple on April 5, 1839. They were also attacked and shot by the village officials. On April 6, 1839, a Mappila stabbed a village official for framing a report against him.<sup>33</sup> More than twenty-two outbreaks of an individualist nature occurred from 1836 to 1853.<sup>34</sup>

The violent conflict on April 5, 1841, at Pallippuram resulted from “landlord-peasant contradiction.”<sup>35</sup> The issue was that the one Mappila tenant, Kunholan, was given an advance of 16 rupees for remaining in tenancy of a garden land. Nambutiri *janmi* gave *melcharth* to another Mappila tenant, and he filed a suit to evict Kunholan.<sup>36</sup> Then Kunholan, his two sons, and six neighbours belonging to the lower order killed the Brahmin *janmi*, Perumbali Nambutiri, and another one. They also burnt four houses belonging to the dependents of the Nambutiri.<sup>37</sup> Then they camped at the *janmis*’ house, and got into conflict with the native infantry, police personnel and villagers on April 9. While native infantry was planning their attack and waiting for the reinforcement to break the door, “the door was flung open and forth rushed the ruffians.”<sup>38</sup> In this attack, one Nayar was killed and ten were wounded, including five police personnel. All the insurgents were also killed in this attack.

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33 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:558.

34 Dr. S. Sharafudeen, *Muslims of Kerala A Modern Approach* (Trivandrum, 2003), 34.

35 Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 68.

36 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:559. Also see Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 68.

37 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:558.

38 Mr. Silvers’ report on April 10, 1841, quoted in Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:558.

The incident at Mannur village on November 13, 1841, is provided with a detailed narrative of the violent incident. A conflict over the construction of a mosque on disputed land caused the attack. Twenty years before the incident, the *janmam* right of the contested land was purchased from Tottassery Kelu Panikkar, and a mosque was built on the land in 1832-33. A mud wall was constructed around the mosque in 1841, and then the current *janmi*, Tachu Panikkar, filed a suit claiming his possession. The village administrator had sent a peon to produce the Mappilas in front of him. The peon entered the mosque, and he had dragged one Mappila out of the mosque despite their request that they would be meeting the administrator after their religious functions. It was the last phase of their religious fasting. Then eight Mappilas killed the Tachu Pnikkar and the peon and stayed in the mosque defending themselves from the police.<sup>39</sup> Panikkar argues that this incident illustrates the intersection of the ‘struggle for the possession of the land, entry of religious element and the support of the state to the landlords.’<sup>40</sup>

The narration of the incident of the fight with the police states:

When we arrived 100 yards of it, five of the Mappilas rushed forward with big knives and shields to defend themselves; two diverged to the left, who were diverged to the left, who were instantly shot by the peons, and three made off to the right towards some paddy-fields, where they were assailed by a file or two of my men, and a few villagers and peons joined them. A struggle took place between a sepoy and one of the Mappilas; an *adhikari* came up and cut him down; a second was attacked by a sepoy who threw him down, and whilst securing him was shot by one or two peons; a third having severely wounded a villager, was also killed. Immediately after the rush of the

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39 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:559–60.

40 Panikkar, *Against Lord and State*, 69.

first men, six more came running headlong down the eminence, similarly aimed, and from the desperation of their maimer the sepoy and peons opened fire upon them and they fell.<sup>41</sup>

Incidents followed a similar pattern in most revolts. Though the outrages of the Mappila peasants in the nineteenth century emerged from their agrarian discontent, their immediate manifestation also depended upon the extra-agrarian forms, such as religion, personal, or political. The immediate reasons were either one of these three forms or a combination of the three forms. All these incidents were violent, manifesting in the physical attacks against the *janmis*, village administrators, government institutions and in some instances, the temples, which were a domain of political and economic dominance of the landed aristocracy, or the temple in itself was a *janmam*. Swords, knives, and guns were used in these attacks. The violence erupted spontaneously either by an individual or a small group. It was not a reaction against the use of violence by the government or the police, but was a reaction against the structural violence perpetuated by the existing oppressive institutions. Most of the time, the insurgents did not have a futuristic vision of transformation or a better material life. Instead, they were always ready to die. The religious leaders and the small Mappila *kanakkars* were often part of the insurgencies.<sup>42</sup>

### **4.3 Legislative Solutions 1880-1900**

The unrest in the agrarian sector, manifested through the violent insurgencies of the Mappila peasants, alerted the British administration. The first government action to

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41 Lieutenant Shakespeare's report on November 20, 1841, quoted in Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:559.

42 Dhanagare argued that in the nineteenth-century revolts by the Mappila peasantry, none of the Mappila *kanakkars* were reported to have participated in the rebellion. This could be the rich *kanakkars*. Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950*, 62.

understand the causes behind the Mappila unrest was to appoint T. L. Strange on February 17, 1852. He submitted the report on September 25, 1852, in which he argued that the outrages were “marked by the most decided fanaticism” of Mappila Muslims.<sup>43</sup> He did not notice any agrarian discontent as the reason for the insurgencies. He suggested the repressive measures, such as introducing a special police force to suppress the insurgencies. The government adopted most of his recommendations and resorted to the repressive measures.

A significant change in the British attitude toward the peasant issue was evident in 1881, when the government appointed William Logan as a second special commissioner to investigate the condition of peasants in Malabar. This initiative was prompted by an anonymous letter received by the Madras Government, which warned of a potential severe outbreak “on account of the strained relationship between landlords and tenants in Malabar.”<sup>44</sup> This letter, received by the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, stated that the Mappilas had planned for violence as a response to the evictions from their land and “disturbance and bloodshed of a kind unknown in Malabar will take place.”<sup>45</sup> Logan submitted his report in 1882. It emphasised the need to protect the interests of the actual cultivator. By actual cultivator he meant the “cultivating proprietor, or the farmer who rents and cultivates the land employing hired labour, or the renting cultivator, pure and simple, who is dependent for the necessary labour on the service of his own family.”<sup>46</sup> Hence, the report of Logan was

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43 Strange, quoted in Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:574.

44 *Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee*, Volume 1 (Madras, 1940), para. 14.

45 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:584.

46 *Malabar Special Commission, 1881-82, Malabar Land Tenures*, no. 1 (Madras, 1882), para. 320.

focussing on the verumpattam tenants, who “finds the labour and capital necessary for cultivation and who accepts the risks and takes the profit of the cultivation.”<sup>47</sup> He stated:

A law which gave the cultivating *kanakkaran* a right to permanency of tenure [In Travancore] would be a good law so far as it went, but in my opinion, it would fail if it did not give equal security to the other classes of actual cultivators who are most frequently sub-tenants of the *kanakkaran*.<sup>48</sup>

The British misconception of the *janmi* as the absolute owner of the land was an encroachment on the customary rights of the agrarian groups, and increased evictions had created discontent among the actual cultivators.<sup>49</sup> It was also reported that the *janmis* were appropriating more than one-third of the produce, which was against the customary practices. Logan proposed curtailing the power of *janmis* and implementing the statutory tenure for small tenure holders.<sup>50</sup> He also suggested several other interventions, such as implementing a rent receipt system and appointing land agents to resolve land disputes without resorting to the court. He also proposed creating ‘a class of small gardeners’ and setting up experimental gardens. Although not within the scope of the inquiry, he also recommended reforms to the matrilineal law of inheritance.<sup>51</sup>

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47 *Malabar Special Commission, 1881-82*, para. 320.

48 *Malabar Special Commission, 1881-82*, para. 328.

49 From 1862-66 to 1877-80, the suits of eviction had increased from 2039 to 4983, an increase of 144 per cent. For the same period, the number of persons against whom the eviction decree had been passed increased from 1891 to 8355, a 342 per cent increase. See, Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 1:587.

50 Logan’s recommendation was to provide the fixity in tenures for the actual cultivators of holding not exceeding 25 acres of wet or dry land, or 5 acres of garden land. *Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee*, para. 14.

51 *Malabar Special Commission, 1881-82*, paras 464–506.

Logan's report explicitly opposed the *janmis*; hence, it was unacceptable to the government.<sup>52</sup> In January 1884, the Madras government appointed another commission presided over by T Madhava Rao. For the first time, two natives of Malabar from the Nayar caste, C. Sankaran Nayar and P. Karunakaran Menon, were members of this committee. Logan, the district magistrate of Malabar and Wigram, the district judge of South Malabar, were the other two committee members. This committee, which submitted its report on July 17, 1884, proposed the fixity of tenures for the tenants who held land directly from the *janmis*. The dynamics of the tenancy reform were shifting towards the interests of the *kanakkar*. But the recommendations of the Madhava Rao committee were vehemently criticised by Charles Turner, the chief justice of Madras High Court. His criticism was based on the British judicial and administrative understanding of *janmis* as the sole owner of the land, and the proposed legislation by the committee would harm that property group.<sup>53</sup>

In September 1884, the government appointed another committee of thirteen members under C.G. Master, a member of the executive council of the Governor. Madhava Rao and Sankaran Nayar were also the members of this committee. This committee did not decide upon the occupancy rights of the tenants but rather proposed securing tenants from eviction and recognising the improvements they made on the land. The Commission proposed two draft Bills: one to prevent eviction without completing the current agricultural season, and the second to provide compensation for improvements made by tenants if they are evicted.<sup>54</sup> However, the government was

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52 P. Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change: Malabar, 1836 - 1982* (New Delhi, 1989), 68.

53 Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change*, 69. Also see, *Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee*, para. 14.

54 Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change*, 70.

only prepared to accept one bill, which suggested compensation for the improvements made to the land. Thus, the Malabar Tenants' Improvement Act, 1887, was passed.

The Malabar Compensation for Tenants' Improvement Act of 1887 was not strong enough to materialise its aim of providing the full market value of the improvement made by the tenants. There were no guidelines for determining the value of the improvements, and the judiciary's interpretations often differed from the act's objective.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the government initiated a process to amend the act. Meanwhile, they also decided to introduce a comprehensive tenancy legislation, which could not be completed because the person working on the tenancy Act, T. Ross, died before completing the task. The government introduced an amendment to the act in 1900. This amendment provided guidelines for the calculation of improvements and payment of compensation. This amendment also could not solve the issues. Gopinath argued that the formula by which the compensation was calculated provided only "75 per cent of the value of annuity and 25 per cent of the cost of improvement." So, the "tenant was denied even the full capitalised value of the net income arising out of the improvement in all cases in which the actual cost of improvement was less than the annuity."<sup>56</sup> In fact, what the tenants wanted was not compensation but fixity. After 1900, there was a significant lack of action from the government.

#### **4.4 Kanam Tenants and Tenancy Legislation (1900-1930)**

Logan, as a special commissioner, had recommended measures to protect the interests of actual cultivators, with a particular focus on the *verumpattam* tenants. However, in

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55 Panikkar, 'Agrarian Legislation and Social Classes', 884.

56 Gopinath Ravindran, 'Early Colonial Tenancy Reform and Agrarian Change in Malabar', *Review of Agrarian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2024): 55.

the Madhava Rao commission, two Nayers were members, representing the interests of the kanam tenants. In fact, the Malabar Marriage Bill, which Sankaran Nayar introduced in the Madras legislative council, was one of the four acts proposed by the Madhava Rao committee.<sup>57</sup> The attempt to curtail the power of the *janmis* focused on protecting the interests of the *kanakkar*. The Nayar middle class could establish their interest as the public demands by then.

The colonial government's 'opinion eliciting practices' always provided an opportunity for the middle class to raise various demands related to the tenancy legislation. For instance, in 1911, the inquiry into the operation of the Malabar Tenancy Act of 1900 generated widespread discussion on tenancy issues in both administrative and public spheres. In 1912, T. M. Nayar, a member of the Madras Legislative Council, prepared a tenancy bill. However, he resigned from the legislative council in 1913; hence, this draft was not introduced in the council.<sup>58</sup> The Malabar Tenancy Association was formed in 1915. By this time, the tenancy movement and national movements were closely associated, as the same Nayar middle class constituted the leadership for both the Tenancy Association and the Congress.<sup>59</sup> They attempted to pass a resolution supporting the kanam tenants agitation at the Conference of the Malabar District Congress at Palakkad in 1916. However, this was not successful due to the significant opposition from the *janmis*. In 1921, a resolution for legislative intervention in the tenancy question was passed at the Manjeri Conference of the Malabar District Congress. This led to the withdrawal of

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57 Ravindran, 'Early Colonial Tenancy Reform and Agrarian Change in Malabar', 53.

58 Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change*, 77.

59 Panikkar, 'Agrarian Legislation and Social Classes', 885.

the *janmis* from the Congress and further consolidation of the Nayar middle class within the Congress.

The leaders of the tenancy association, M. Krishnan Nayar and K. P. Raman Nayar, contested the 1923 election to the Madras Legislative Council.<sup>60</sup> Krishnan Nayar, the elected leader of the tenancy agitation, introduced a Tenancy Bill that provided for permanent occupancy for all *kanakkar* and *verumpattam* tenants holding tenure for six years. The government was opposed to this Bill and appointed F. B. Evans, the Second Secretary to the government.<sup>61</sup> Evans, who considered the Bill a result of caste conflicts in various parts of Malabar, rejected the necessity of legislative intervention. There were widespread protests and meetings against Evan's recommendation.<sup>62</sup> In July 1926, the Bill was debated in the Legislative Council, where the majority of members supported the Bill, rejecting Evan's recommendation. On September 2, 1926, the Bill was passed in the council. However, the governor withheld his sanction and appointed another committee, led by T. Raghaviah, to investigate this matter. The committee, which took opinion from Palakkad, Calicut and Thalassery, submitted its report in the middle of 1928. This committee recommended fixity in tenures and fair rent and renewal fees to the tenants. Based on this recommendation, the Malabar Tenancy Act XIV of 1930 came into force on December 1, 1930.

The enactment of the Tenancy Act was the result of prolonged agitation by the *kanakkar*, led by the middle-class Nayars and supported by the national movement. It

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60 There were a total of five constituencies in the Malabar district. Three were reserved for *janmis* and Muslims. The remaining two were the general constituencies.

61 Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change*, 82.

62 Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change*, 83.

also remarked a conjuncture in which the Nayar middle class emerged as a powerful force in the public sphere and colonial administration. By this period, the colonial state started favouring this socially powerful section instead of the traditional *janmis*. The appointment of Krishnan Nayar as the law secretary to the government was said to be a catalyst in achieving this legislation.<sup>63</sup> Panikkar observed that the tenancy movement was confined to the *kanakkar*, where the problems of the *verumapptakkar*, the bulk of whom were the tenants-at-will under the *kanakkar*, were scrupulously left out.”<sup>64</sup>

#### **4.5 Peasants and Politics Since 1930s**

The peasant agitation since the beginning of the twentieth century, which culminated in enacting the Malabar Tenancy Act of 1930, was a movement by the *kanam* tenants. The emerging Nayar middle class led these agitations, and most agitations were limited to the meetings and representation to the government. The middle class who emerged from the new aristocracy had access to the colonial government, so they used these opportunities to fulfil their demands. They achieved their demands by 1930 with the passing of the legislation. These agitations represented the caste’s interest over the interests of various sections of the peasantry.<sup>65</sup>

The later peasant agitations, strengthened by the middle of the 1930s, were the peasant movements in their full sense. Dilip Menon has argued that the Great Depression and the legislative enactments such as the Madras Marumakkathayam Act of 1932 and the Malabar Tenancy Act of the 1930s disrupted the authority of traditional power structures in rural Malabar, and a ‘community of peasants’ formed

63 Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change*, 86–87.

64 Panikkar, ‘Agrarian Legislation and Social Classes’, 886.

65 Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change*.

against the landlords.<sup>66</sup> Marxist historians considered this as a phase of well-organised class struggle by the peasantry, “with the interest of lower peasantry at the fore and the *verumpattam* tenants in the forefront”.<sup>67</sup>

The Great Depression of the 1930s had a significant impact on the political economy of rural Malabar. The boom in the 1920s, which boosted the export of cash crops, instigated the expansion of cultivation.<sup>68</sup> However, this growth spurt did not last long because of various interplays in the global economy. The demands for the cash crops declined drastically from the 1930s, creating tremendous economic pressure in rural Malabar. This fall invariably affected small *janmis*, *kanakkars* and *verumpattakkar*. The only group which had comparatively less affected was rich *janmis*. Agriculture was no longer economical, and the big *janmis* extracted more rent and feudal levies and impoverished the peasantry. Malabar lagged in industrial development, further limiting the impoverished peasantry’s alternative employment opportunities.<sup>69</sup>

The monetisation of the economy and the vigorous attempt of the *janmis* to establish their ownership over non-agricultural lands such as forests and wetlands

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66 Dilip M. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar, 1900-1948* (Cambridge, 2008), 7.

67 Radhakrishnan, *Peasant Struggles, Land Reforms and Social Change*, 89.

Prakash Karat, ‘The Peasant Movement in Malabar, 1934-40’, *Social Scientist* 5, no. 2 (1976): 30–44.

68 Dilip Menon states that between 1900 and 1930, more than two lakh acres of land were brought under the cultivation of pepper and coconut. There was a spike in the price of these cash crops between 1920 and 1930 due to the Dutch East Indies’ production shortage. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 121.

Cash crop cultivation was much easier and more economical for *janmis* since it does not require less labour and maintenance than paddy cultivation. K. Gopalankutty, ‘The Peasant Movements in Malabar, 1936-1939’, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 37 (1976): 379.

69 Gopalankutty, ‘The Peasant Movements in Malabar, 1936-1939’, 379.

resulted in the denial of access to these lands by the lower peasantry. The customary right of peasants to collect firewood and use the pastoral lands was curtailed, eroding traditional relations in rural Malabar.<sup>70</sup> The customary practice of soft money loans in needy times was also disturbed. This inability had a severe impact since it was a time when other sources of moneylending, such as bank loans, dried up due to the Depression.<sup>71</sup> The Tenancy Act and Marumakkathayam Act also transformed the structure of the *travads*. Tenancy legislation restructured the *janmi-kudiyar* relations, and the Marumakkathayam Act provided the right to partition. These two pieces of legislation also disrupted the relationship between *janmi* and intermediary tenants, and confrontation resulted.

When socialist groups within the Congress decided to form peasant unions across Malabar, the material conditions for a larger peasant unity existed. Civil disobedience and the imprisonment of the middle-class nationalists changed their perception about the mobilisation of the masses. Most of them were disappointed with the withdrawal of the movement by Gandhi. When young nationalists were released from prison by 1934, they had developed a new political understanding. The interaction with various socialist leaders from other parts of India drew many of them towards socialist ideology. They realised the necessity of mobilising peasants. The decision to form peasant unions was made while they were in jail. Hence, once they were released, peasant unions were established in various Malabar villages.

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70 In 1932, there was a decision to fix cattle feeding charges as two *anas*. Revenue R Dis, No. 111358/32 date 12/4/33, Revenue Department Bundle Number 373, Serial Number 16, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

71 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 123–24.

The first peasant union started in Naniyur in Chirakkal *taluk* in 1935.<sup>72</sup> This union organised various protests against illegal extraction of feudal levies and attacks on peasants by *janmis*. In the same year, peasant unions were formed in various villages in Chirakkal, Kurumbranad, and Valluvanad *taluks*. The same year, Kerala Karshaka Sangham (Peasant Union of Kerala) was formed at Pattambi—two important congress socialists and later communists, E.M.S. Nambudiripad and C. K. Govindan Nayar were elected as the president and secretary of the union at this meeting. The formation of All India Kisan Sabha encouraged the activities of the peasants union in Malabar. In May, 1938 Malabar Peasant Union was formed under the Kerala Karshaka Sangham.

Since the formation of Malabar Peasant Union it has been the socialist group within the Congress that organised peasants. The non-socialist group within congress was still working with Gandhian Harijan programmes and non-liquor agitations. By 1938, the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee came under the leadership of the socialist group, which further boosted the peasant movement.

The peasant union's early programs were against illegitimate collections and the attacks on tenants' property and the person by *janmis*. The restrictions on the customary rights hitherto enjoyed by the various sections of society were challenged. Looking at the demand and how the protests were conducted, Dilip Menon argues that an 'inchoate sense' of moral economy emerged in rural Malabar.<sup>73</sup> The just and unjust were defined by the peasant union, and early activities of the union from 1935 were

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72 K. N. Ganesh, C. P. Abubakar, V Karthikeyan Nayar, C Balan, E Rajan, and Puthalath Dineshan, eds, *Keralathile Communist Partiyude Charithram* (Thiruvananthapuram, 2018), 1:258.

73 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 135.

the protest against the erosion of the moral economy.<sup>74</sup> He also says that these early activities did not represent a clear-cut class character of the peasantry.<sup>75</sup>

In this earlier phase of organised peasant movements, protest marches and meetings were held in various parts of Malabar. The demands were negotiated with the *janmis* by the local level leaders. *Janmis* were cautious during this period, and in preference to the repressive measures, they resorted to litigation and judiciary to a greater degree. The peasant union was not violent but militant. They strongly raised their demands and, in many instances, succeeded.

There was a desire for an alternative culture, which materialised through the literary movement and peasant *jathas* (processions with slogans), where slogans of equality were raised.<sup>76</sup> Almost all the public gatherings were followed by dramas which depicted the atrocities of the *janmitham* (landlordism) and the need for unity and struggle.<sup>77</sup> A cultural wing also worked with the Congress Socialist who composed songs about their politics. The literary movement by the socialists included the establishment of schools, libraries, and newspapers.

This emerging consciousness was not based on any existing identities such as caste or religion, but on a principle of equality between all sections of society. Unity based on class was the need of the time. This is not to suggest that caste and religious consciousness did not play any role in this peasant movement -instead, it indicates the attempt to establish a class-based movement and alternative cultural practices. Still,

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74 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 134.

75 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 141.

76 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 147–51.

77 Two dramas by K Damodaran, Pattabakki (Arrears of Rent) and Rakthapanam (drinking of Blood), were played in almost all villages in Malabar. See Gopalankutty, 'The Peasant Movements in Malabar, 1936-1939', 379.

the *janmis* and upper caste people attempted to defend themselves with caste privileges and caste hierarchy was enforced. The various instances of the caste violence by the upper castes in the 1930s happened at this conjuncture.

#### **4.6 Peasant Conflicts 1935-1940**

Confrontations and conflicts with the *janmis* characterised the initial years of the peasant union. The peasant union became the negotiator of the peasants' issues with the *janmis*. On many instances, they collectively threatened and pressured *janmis* to accept their demands. However, this militancy was limited to a few leaders. The *janmis'* reaction to the emergence of the peasant union manifested in two ways. On the one hand, they resorted to physical intimidation using their *karyasthar* and loyalists. On the other hand, *janmis* and their loyalists filed numerous cases, falsely or exaggerating the situation, against the leaders of the unions at the local level. This method proved to be an effective strategy to a considerable extent in monitoring the union's activities. Judicial litigations most of the time ended up favouring the *janmis* because the protection of property and life was considered an essential function of the judicial and administrative system. The absence of the colonial police and the conflict between the peasants and the police were a general feature of this period. A close examination of the incidents in various regions will reveal the characteristics of the contestation and conflicts between *janmis* and peasant unions.

Conflict between peasant union and *janmi* in Kankole village near Payyannur reveals the nature of contestations and conflict on peasant issues. Manipuzha Illom was a wealthy Nambutiri household that owned most of the land in Kankole amsom. There was an increasing demand for cultivable land in this area and the *janmi* was

keen in evicting tenants.<sup>78</sup> Chandu, a tenant had been staying in a small hut on this land belonging to his *janmi* since 1936. Peasant union had been getting momentum in the locality, and Chandu joined the peasant union against the advice of the *janmi*. In the middle of June, 1938 the manager of the property asked Chandu to vacate his home immediately. The manager also took some of the coconuts that Chandu had cultivated.<sup>79</sup> He informed the peasant union leaders of this situation. His paternal uncle was the president of the peasant union in the nearby village. Peasant union leaders and Chandu visited the *janmi* to deliberate on this issue. They told the *janmi* that he must allow Chandu to stay on the property since his shed stood in his *kuzhikanam* right.<sup>80</sup> When denied, the leaders went away with a warning. They informed A. V. Kunhambu, who had organised a Akhila Bharat Yuvak Sangham (All India Youth Organisation, hereafter ABYS) about this situation. ABYS had a strong base in Northern part of Chirakkal taluk.

*Janmi* started construction on the property in question. On June 28, 1938, when the construction was happening, a group of peasant union members and ABYS activists entered the land. The police report says that they were armed with sticks and knives. An intense altercation happened between the *janmi* and the peasant union activists. They started collecting coconuts and plantains from the property. When the

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78 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 140.

79 The *janmi* accused Chandu of stealing some of his areca nut plants from his property. Case No. 22 of 1938. In the Court of Sessions of North Malabar dated January 28, 1939, Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

80 *Kuzhikanam* was one of the types of land tenure in which the *janmi* leased garden land to the tenant for the purpose of developing the land by expanding cultivation and maintaining crops. The Malabar Tenancy Act 1929 defined the *kuzhikanam* rights as the right of the tenant to “hold the said lands liable for the consideration paid by him or due to him, which is considered as *kanartham*.” It also recognises the *janmi*'s liability to pay to the tenant interest on the *kanartham*. The Malabar Tenancy Act, 1929, Act 14 of 1930, Chapter 1, section 15.

*janmi* and his men objected, more people from the peasant union gathered and collected more coconuts and plantains. They also cut down some plantains and threaten the *janmi* by saying, “We will cut you too, even as we are cutting the plantains and coconut.” It is said that while entering the property, peasant union leaders shouted,

We will teach this fellow to collect his rent and what exactly his position as a *janmi* is. This fellow has not leased the property to Chandu in spite of our request. We will show him how he will collect his rent, which has *pathinnurandu*.<sup>81</sup>

After the incident on June 28, there was non-cooperation with the family of the *janmi*. Then, the land under the direct cultivation of the *janmi* was kept not cultivated since no peasant was willing to work there. They had no other option but to get workers from the neighbouring villages. They then assigned one of their tenants who lived in Koram, a neighbouring village, to get some agricultural workers and bulls to plough the lands. On November 1, the tenant got six workers and bulls for ploughing; they started work on the land. Then, the peasant union leaders came up with an objection and asked the workers to stop the work. Then a confrontation started, and more union workers, about 25, gathered there. The tenant was adamant that he would plough the land. The workers from the neighbouring land expressed their helplessness since they would not get paid if they did not work on the land.<sup>82</sup>

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81 Judgement of the Case no. 22 of 1938 In the court of sessions of North Malabar on January 28, 1939, Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

82 Criminal Case No. 524 of 1939. In the court of second class magistrate of Thaliparamba on March 28, 1939, Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

The peasant union workers “were prepared to do anything to resist the ploughing.” When the tenant of the *janmi* insisted that he would get the land ploughed, the peasant union leader said, “If you plough the field or get the field ploughed, you will not be left as you are.” When the conflict was increasing, the question of the workers brought from the next village came up, and an old man among the union activists said that the workers had “come today all the way from Koram, they may be allowed to carry on with the work on the distinct understanding that they would not go again their for the purpose.” This was agreed, and peasant union workers left. Then, that day afternoon, the tenant went to the police station and filed a case against 10 peasant union activist and all of them were convicted with imprisonment. Most of the peasant union members who were convicted were very young. Among the 10 people convicted at Kankole, seven out of ten were below 30 years of age.<sup>83</sup>

At Kankole, the peasant union leaders acted as the negotiators of the peasant issue. The middle-class leaders intervened at the instance of eviction and threatened the *janmi*. When it was not successful, the boycott of the works on the *janmi*'s land was used as a method of protest. They aggressively resisted the attempts of *janmi* to break their boycott. *Janmi* employed physical force and litigation as a means to counter the union's activities.

Another region where the peasant union gained momentum was in the Irikkur *firka* of North Malabar. The Kalliattu *taravad* controlled a significant portion of the

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83 Criminal Case No. 524 of 1939, Second Class magistrate of Taliparamba on March 28, 1939. Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4 Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

land in this region.<sup>84</sup> The peasant union activity in this region was threatening to the Kalliat *taravad*. In October 1938, peasants organised a massive procession of 4000 people to the Kalliattu *taravad*. This march demonstrated the biases of *karyasthans*<sup>85</sup> buying and selling of labourers, demanding the abolition of unpaid labour, and the custom of collecting seed as rent by the *janmi*.<sup>86</sup> Hence, the confrontations were increasing, and *janmis* were well determined to disrupt the activities of the peasant union. There were agents of *janmis* who tried to disrupt union activities, and one such attempt ended up in a confrontation.

On October 24, 1938, a meeting of peasants was called to form the peasant union. One K. P. Narayanan Nambiar, a teacher at the Keezhur Elementary School and the son of the manager of the *janmi* of the Kalliattu *taravad* in Keezhur, also attended this meeting. He spoke in the meeting and said peasants should not fight against *janmis*. He also spoke in another meeting at Iritty on October 29, which was also intended to form the peasant union. There he spoke that the peasants were idlers as they only worked two hours a day, and that was the reason for their poverty, and there was no necessity for the peasant union. Hence, *janmis* should not be fought, and their rent should be paid regularly. He suggested that, instead of the peasant union, a cooperative society should be formed. However, a union was formed, and one M. K. Ramunni, a young Thiyaa, was elected as the secretary of the union. On the next meeting of the union on November 21, Narayanan Nambiar was elected to preside

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84 Dilip Menon says they were the largest landowners in North Malabar. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 13.

85 *Karyasthan* is a servant of a *taravad*, who takes care of or oversees the day-to-day affairs of the *taravad*. He manages the household affairs, agricultural cultivation, and any other matters related to the *taravad*, taking instructions from the head of the *taravad*. His role is similar to that of a manager. There used to be one or more *karyasthar* in each household.

86 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 135.

over that meeting, and one of the men loyal to *janmis* moved a resolution to the effect that tenants should be allowed to ask the *janmis* individually for a reduction of rent without the consent of the union. The agenda of the loyalists was to break the unity and show that the tenants close to *janmis* would be favourable. Understanding this the secretary of the union said it could not be moved in the meeting since it would cause trouble for cultivators. A split occurred, and the secretary and others left the meeting and held another meeting in the neighbouring paddy field.<sup>87</sup>

There was an altercation between the secretary of peasant union and Narayanan Nambiar in which the secretary asked him to stop speaking in the meetings without joining the union. It is also said that the secretary threatened him with dismissal from the school, and if he could not do that, he would try to stop the children of cultivators from going to the school. It is said that in a meeting of peasant union on December 6, 1938, a resolution was passed that Krishnan Nambiar should be dismissed from the school and people should not send their children there. Then, the regular attendance at the school was reduced to half, from 120 to 60 by December 20, 1938.<sup>88</sup>

Then Narayanan Nambiar filed a complaint that the union secretary had threatened him with trouble and with dismissal from his job if he did not join the union. The threat of dismissal was articulated by the court as a threat against the property of the Nambiar since he got a hundred rupees per year from teaching. It also mentioned that there was a threat of physical attack and slander on his reputation. In

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87 Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4 Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

88 Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4 Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

this case, the secretary of the peasant union was sentenced to imprisonment for six months.<sup>89</sup>

Another example of the conflict between the *janmis* and peasant union occurred at Padiyotchal in Kannur. Govindan Nambiar was the headmaster of the Padiyotchal Board School. He was vocal against the peasant union and asked people not to join the union. Hence the union had given complaint against him to the school district board. This created further fury between him and the leaders of the peasant union. On December 1, 1938, at the local bazaar, there was an altercation between him and the three peasant union leaders of the locality. Among these three, two were Thiyyas, and one was a Nayar. In that alteration, the local leaders had said that they would cut off his leg if he instigated people not to join the union.<sup>90</sup>

A complaint was filed by Govindan Nambiar on December 6, 1938, with the joint magistrate of Thalassery. The court took the complaint seriously and found that it was a grievous charge and sentenced all three to imprisonment for up to six years. The peasant union leaders said that this complaint was framed due to the instigation of the *janmi* of the locality and his manager.<sup>91</sup>

In the same locality, another complaint was registered against five peasant union activists in December 1938. This complaint was registered by one K. Kannan Nayar, who was a member of the board attendance committee for the district board

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89 Criminal Case no. 93 of 1938 in the court of the joint magistrate of Thalassery on January 24, 1939. Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4 Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

90 Criminal Case no. 96 of 1939 in the Court of Joint Magistrate of Thalassery on March 7, 1939. Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4 Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

91 Criminal Case no. 96 of 1939 in the Court of Joint Magistrate of Thalassery on March 7, 1939. Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4 Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

school at Padiyotchal. The complaint was that he was being forced but not willing to join the peasant union, and there was an enmity between him and the peasant union leaders. He complained that when his mother died, a *mattu* (a purified white cloth)<sup>92</sup> was needed for the ceremony on November 27, 1938. He asked the washerwoman to provide one. When she did not turn up, he asked and came to know that the peasant union leaders had forbidden her to give it to him. Then he went to the union office in the town, and a confrontation happened between him and five peasant union activists. He was then threatened by them. They said they would only provide the *mattu* if he joined the union. They surrounded him and forcefully took his signature on the joining form. Then he was allowed to go and collect the *mattu*.<sup>93</sup>

Then, Kannan Nayar submitted a complaint to the joint magistrate at Thalassery. The court considered the complaint as a serious offence. The court observed that

The coming of accused in a body, their attitude towards the complainant, surrounding him, their persistence and what was said collectively that they had the common intention of using a show of criminal force against (the complainant) to make him do what he was not bound to do.<sup>94</sup>

The court convicted all five for rigorous imprisonment for four months.

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92 *Mattu* was a washed white cloth. It was the duty of the washer caste people to provide *mattu* to Nambutiris, Nayars, and Ezhavas before bathing on the day they were free from pollution. Death was considered an event of pollution, and after certain days, there would be a ritualistic bath which denoted the end of pollution.

93 Criminal case no. 5 of 1939 In the court of the joint magistrate of Thalassery on March 7, 1939. Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4 Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

94 Criminal case no. 5 of 1939 In the court of the joint magistrate of Thalassery on March 7, 1939. Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4 Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

The two cases of Padiyotchal came to the court on the same day. C.P. Kunhiraman, leader of the peasant union of the locality, was convicted in both cases. What is interesting in both cases is the court's narrative of events in a grave manner. The 'threat' was taken as a severe offence, and the words were expanded to bring the meaning to the severe sections.

Section 503 IPC says that threat must cause 'injury to his person, reputation or property...the word person must be included his individuality, his position, his ordinary rights as a human being in the position...' 'trouble' is clearly, if meant, as it obviously in this case, a 'threat' or injury to his person.<sup>95</sup>

This is how the court convicted under a relevant section for criminal intimidation. And though this event occurred before the event with the Narayanan Nambiar, the headmaster of the school, the complaint was registered after he complained in court. It was only four days after his complaint this second complaint was filed. Both of them used the same method and argument and also named the important peasant union leaders of the locality. This indicates that this might be an orchestrated action, and as peasant union leaders pointed out, the *janmi* of the locality was behind it. The attitude of the court and government was also against the peasant union. They found the union as a trouble maker and with criminal character. The peasant union leaders clarified that this case was manipulated by the *janmis* to suppress the union since its objectives concerning peasant interests threatened them. They also said they were too poor to engage an advocate in the cases and had to

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95 Criminal case no. 5 of 1939 In the court of the joint magistrate of Thalassery on March 7, 1939. Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4 Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

defend themselves. They also said that they committed no offences and were 'not guilty in the eyes of the public,' and if convicted, prepared to go to prison.

Peasant union activities in the Kurumathur village (Malappattam) in Thaliparamba created numerous conflicts since the beginning. Kurumathur Illom was the biggest landholding *taravad* in the village. There were instances of miscalculation of improvements made by tenants on their leased land.<sup>96</sup> Managers of the *janmis* always recorded reduced improvements in the land since compensation for the improvements has to be given by the *janmis*. Once the peasant union started functioning, they started lodging official complaints against the managers of *janmi* about these mischiefs. On August 31, 1938, there was a peasant march to the *janmi* of Kurumathur. They demanded the abolition of atrocious extraction. *Karyasthar* of the *janmi* used to take commission while collecting the rent. They also wanted to end this unfair extraction as well.<sup>97</sup> This created tension, not only between peasants and *janmi* but also between the peasants and the *karyasthar* of the *janmis*.

One *karyasthan* of the *janmi*, Ussan Mammad, filed a complaint against the union members. The complaint was submitted with the support of Kurumathur Nambutiripad, the *janmi* of the village. The *janmi* wanted to suppress the activities of the union. On February 7, 1939, members of the peasant union organised an effigy-burning of Ussan Mammad, condemning the false case registered upon the union activists. Mammad, who was going to *janmi's* home, met with the protesters, and he saw the effigy with his name written on it. Then he tried to stop it, saying that they couldn't burn his effigy since it was against the religious sentiments of the Mappilas

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96 Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4 Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

97 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 135.

and that they were hurting not only his feelings but also his religious sentiments. Without listening to the objection, protesters burned the effigy. When the confrontation continued, some of the activists got agitated and said, “Do not talk much; put him also in the fire.” Then, a few seized Mammad and dragged him towards the fire. He had to run away to escape from the anger of the activists.<sup>98</sup>

Mammad lodged a complaint in the police station, and seven of the activists were convicted and imprisoned for up to four months on charges of unlawful assembly and criminal intimidation. Most of the activists were young. Six out of seven were below 35 years old. The unionists proclaimed their innocence and pleaded not guilty.<sup>99</sup>

#### **4.7 Morazha Incident**

Three significant developments occurred between 1937 and 1939. First, in the first election after the Government of India Act, 1935, which provided provincial autonomy, the Congress Party formed a government in the Madras Presidency in February 1937. Second, Socialist groups within the Congress were elected to the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (hereafter KPCC) leadership in 1938. Third, some of the socialist leaders from Congress secretly established the Communist Party of India in Kerala. The enthusiasm for parliamentary politics and a distinctive ideological perspective on understanding political participation were reflected in the mass activities in Malabar. Peasant union and socialist activities spurt across Malabar.

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98 Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4 Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

99 Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 4 Serial Number 15, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Significant mobilisation and political vibrancy were visible in the political movements since then. The violent incident at Morazha occurred in this context.

Morazha is the only incident where a police officer or any colonial administrator lost his life in the entire history of the peasant movements in the period concerned.<sup>100</sup> The violent incident at Morazha did not result from any peasant grievances as such. It was a political protest, announced by the Left-led KPCC, concerning the August offer made by Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India and the speech of L.S. Amery, the Secretary of State for India, in the British Parliament on August 14, 1940. Congress at the all-India level was disappointed with the announcements made by them, and the KPCC asked its committees to organise protest events. Accordingly, a meeting of the Congress Working Committee decided to organise protest meetings on September 15 in various parts of Malabar. In solidarity with this protest call, the *Karshaka Sangham* also announced marches and meetings against inflation and for regulations to deal with it.<sup>101</sup>

The district collector had banned the Protest Day gatherings anywhere in Malabar under the Security Act.<sup>102</sup> Despite this, there was large crowds gathering for the events at various places. An event was planned at Keecherry in Chirakkal Taluk. Prominent communist leaders like E.M.S. Nambudiripad and P. Krishna Pilla, who were hiding in the nearby villages, were involved in the detailed planning of the

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100 There was a death of a police officer in Kayyur. But it occurred in a very different context, where a police officer jumped into a river to see a peasant march. He was drunk, and it was under the influence of alcohol that he mistook the peasants for coming after him and panicked. He could not swim or cross the river because of the impact of alcohol.

101 Chinthavila Murali, Sakhavu P Krishna Pilla (Comrade P. Krishna Pilla: Biography) (Chintha Publishers, 2017), 590.

102 Mathrubhumi, September 15, 1940. Quoted in K Damodaran, *Morazha* (Kozhikode, 2022), 63.

protest. A.V. Kunhambu, who was the local peasant leader of Chirakkal taluk, was called by the Krishna Pilla to Pappinissery one night before September 15, where they discussed in detail the protest. When Kunhambu expressed their confusion about the venue of the gathering, it was Krishna Pilla who suggested Keecheri. He also said that if the protest was banned at Keecheri, then the venue should be changed to the Anchampeedika in Morazha. He did not wish to announce this plan in public.<sup>103</sup> In the same manner, Vishnu Bharatheeyan, another important peasant union leader, was also consulted by Krishna Pilla on September 14. Bharatheeyan writes in his autobiography that he received a letter from Krishna Pilla asking him to preside over the protest meeting. As per the instructions in that letter, he met Krishna Pilla at Pappinissery that night.

He asked me to speak about the rights and demands of the peasants. I asked him if the meeting is called against India joining the War against the will of the people and the announcement of Amrey in Parliament. He said that, along with that, we should also raise the issues of the peasants.<sup>104</sup>

As expected, the meeting at Keecheri was prohibited by the authority, and police were deployed under the sub-inspector of Valapattanam, Kutti Krishna Menon. There were only 14 police officers and one head constable, along with the sub-inspector. Then the meeting was shifted to Anchampeedika in Morazha as previously planned. The prohibitory order, it was thought, was not applicable to Morazha *amsom*. The same police party arrived at Anchampeedika with the sub-magistrate of Thaliparamba to declare the prohibition order. Peasant union leaders contested that it was not under the

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103 M. N. Kurup, *A V Kunhambu* (Mavelikkara, 2000), 142–43.

104 V.M. Vishnu Bharatheeyan, *Adimakalengane Udamakalayi* (Kannur, 2018), 142. Translation mine.

jurisdiction of the sub-magistrate of Thaliparamba or the sub-inspector of Valapattanam.<sup>105</sup> However, the police disrupted the meeting and *lathi*-charged the leaders and activists. The crowd became violent, and sub-inspector Kutti Krishna Menon and another police constable were killed in the melee.

When I started addressing the peasants, Valapattanam sub-inspector Kuttikrishna Menon approached me and asked me to disperse the meeting. I replied that I will be dispersing the gathering once the meeting is over. Then he said to me that he would crack my head with the lathi. Then he turned towards the crowd and asked them to disperse. I noticed confusion among the crowd and some movements. Then I spoke to the crowd that, as the president of the meeting, it was my right to decide whether to end the meeting or not, and they were not supposed to act according to the orders of the police. ‘We have decided to disobey this order. This is not the first time. So I request you all to sit until I say, in my capacity as the president of this meeting, that the meeting is over.’ The crowd listened to what I said, and those who had started to disperse came back and sat there.<sup>106</sup>

Police used force against Bharatheeyan, but he lay on the floor, holding onto the flag post, resisting his arrest. It was when the police started their action that a peasant march under the leadership of Arakkal Kunhiraman arrived at the venue. The police asked the march to halt and disperse. Then the leader of the march said that they had no intention to go back but to march ahead. The police then attacked Kunhiraman with *lathis*. They left him once they thought that he was dead.<sup>107</sup> Then the crowd

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105 Bharatheeyan, *Adimakalengane Udamakalayi*, 144.

106 Bharatheeyan, *Adimakalengane Udamakalayi*, 145. Translation mine.

107 Damodaran, *Morazha*, 66.

surrounded the police party and started pelting stones at them. It was in this attack that Kutti Krishna Menon and the police constable were killed.

A closer look at these incidents reveals that the protest was well planned and it determined to be a militant protest. Hence, it was not a result of the local rivalries and tensions in the rural authority, as Menon argues.<sup>108</sup> What happened was a consequence of the political militancy, took a violent turn. Scholars who theorised violence in the peasant movements, looking at the incidents at Morazha, did a faulty reading.

#### **4.8 Peasant Unions: Karivallur and Kavumbayi**

Much more intense peasant struggle emerged in the post-second World War period. Prakasam Ministry at Madras created a food procurement plan for Malabar. The government decided to procure food grains through cooperative societies instead of from private dealers. Communist leaders and the peasant union leaders alleged that the then district collector of Malabar, Muir, and other officials had sabotaged this plan to benefit *janmis* and private dealers. Accordingly, district administration sanctioned permits to big contractors and private dealers. The communist newspaper *Deshabhimani* and the nationalist newspaper *Mathrubhumi* exposed this deviation from the government plan. Immediately, the Madras Government transferred the collector.<sup>109</sup> The new collector, Bryant, was notorious for the maximum number of orders for firings that ever took place in any district of Madras Presidency when he was the district collector at Madurai. He followed his predecessor's example by aligning with the *janmis* and big dealers.

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108 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 155.

109 E. M. S Nambudiripad, "Speech at Marina Beach, Madras on January 5, 1947." Government Transcription of the Speech of E.M. Sankaran Nambudiripad, From Commissioner of Police, Madras, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, January 24, 1947. 11(25), Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Peasant union started agitation against the collector's policy. The situation was explained:

In Malabar, the total production of rice is estimated by the government to be 365000 tons...Last year, the quantity procured by the government was no more than 56000 tons, which is only one-seventh. That is, out of every seven tons produced in Malabar, only one ton has gone to the government...the rest go into the black market.<sup>110</sup>

Exposing this made the communists enemy of the administrators and the big *janmis*. Peasant union also started agitating against *janmis*, who were taking away the grains. The peasants said:

You (*janmis*) have to get rent, and we will pay rent, but only in cash and not in paddy. We will hand over any surplus paddy, that is, paddy after taking our cultivation expenses and our own ration; we will hand over the surplus to the government and not to you.<sup>111</sup>

The peasant union also started identifying the cultivable land kept vacant by the *janmis*. They occupied that land and started cultivating it. *Janmis* were against this, though the peasant union assured that they would pay the land's fixed rent.

In Payyannur, there were four cases of obstruction to the transport of paddy and forcible removal. There is also a case of intimidation of local *janmis*. A grain purchase inspector was attacked and confined all night by a group of communists. In

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110 E. M. S Nambutiripad, "Speech at Marina Beach, Madras on January 5, 1947." Government Transcription of the Speech of E.M. Sankaran Nambutiripad, From Commissioner of Police, Madras, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, January 24, 1947. 11(25), Regional Archives Kozhikode.

111 E. M. S Nambutiripad, Speech at Marina Beach, Madras on January 5, 1947. Government Transcription of the Speech of E.M. Sankaran Nambutiripad, From Commissioner of Police, Madras, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, January 24, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

addition, there was an incident where peasant union activists forcefully entered the land of a local *janmis* land to cut tethering grass.

In Irikkur, the police recorded one paddy obstruction case, and two other cases, one of them in connection with trespass and grass cutting, had been registered against the communists.

These cases only represent a small proportion of the incidents of obstruction and intimidation during the last two or three months. As joint Magistrate of Thalassery, I heard many instances where *janmis* had been unable to move their paddy because of communist obstruction, but the landlords and others affected by similar acts of lawlessness on the part of communists have been too scared to report them to the police.<sup>112</sup>

Police were provided with immense resources by the government for their campaign against the communists. The regional-level officers requested more resources, such as office staff and vehicles.<sup>113</sup> More police stations and outposts were opened in the communist areas.<sup>114</sup> An advance payment of 300 rupees had been provided to the special deputy superintendent of police of Kannur for payment to informants in January 1947. It was also noted that the arrangements for further

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112 Letter. District magistrate to the chief secretary of Madras on December 26, 1946. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

113 District Magistrate requested three jeeps and six additional staff such as clerks, typists and peons for Joint Magistrate at Thalassery who led the campaign against the communists. Letters. District Magistrate to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras dated January 1 and 3, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

114 Extra deputy superintendent of police was sanctioned for the Kannur subdivision in February 1947. The District Police Superintendent requested four more police stations. Letter. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police on February 24, 1947, 11(25). G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

payment were made 'so that every sub-inspector working with the Madras Special Police had an advance with him to pay all the guides and informants liberally.<sup>115</sup> In January 1947, 591 rupees was spent as the reward money.<sup>116</sup>The determination of the colonial state to suppress the peasant movement and the communist party led to clashes between police and peasant unions at various locations. We will be discussing two localities, Karivallur and Kavumbayi, the two places where the conflict resulted in the bloodbath.

### ***Karivallur***

Karivallur village near Payyannur was in the northernmost part of Malabar district. The geography of the village is was marked by jungles and inaccessible land, intercepted by unbridged rivers. Big landlords controlled all the lands in this village, and common people were mainly agricultural workers.<sup>117</sup> The economic condition of the people was deteriorating; even the colonial official reports stated that the communist leaning of the people of this locality had derived its origin from the economic life of this part of the country.<sup>118</sup> The peasant union had started functioning

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115 Letter. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police on January 14, 1947, 11(25). G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

116 Letter. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police on February 6, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

117 Report. District superintendent of police, Malabar, to inspector general of police, Madras. Dated December 21, 1946. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

118 Report. District superintendent of police, dated December 21, 1946. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

in this locality in 1938, and by the next decade, most people had joined the communist party.

Local leaders had emerged among the natives, and since then, they were against the customary right of *janmis* for a share in the produce.<sup>119</sup> A peasant union was formed in July 1938 in Karivallur. Since then, they conducted various protests against the *janmis* of the village. Chirakkal Raja held a vast amount of land in this region. There were very unjust practices by which peasants were exploited. In the union's first meeting, they decided to oppose the collection of four *paise* for every *seer*<sup>120</sup> of paddy as rent. In 1937, a march of peasants led by A.V Kunhambu to the Chirakkal Raja demanded the same.<sup>121</sup> However, Karivallur was a village where tensions between peasants and landlords had been very high since the beginning. By the middle of 1946, the peasant union declared that tenants should not pay the landlord's share of the harvest. After that the landlords in the locality faced challenges in collecting their customary share.

The government declared the Chirakkal taluk, including Karivallur, a grain deficit area because the village could not even have eight ounces of rice ration. In this context, the peasant union was against transporting the rice grain from the village to outside. They demanded that the *janmis* should hand over the rice cultivated in that village to cooperative stores and take the fair price fixed by the government. However, *janmis* wanted to take the grain away so they could sell them on the open market with huge profits. Hence, resistance was built by the peasant union in this

119 Report. district Superintendent of police, dated December 21, 1946. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

120 Seer is a traditional measurement often used for grains, generally ranging from around 800g to over 1kg.

121 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 134.

matter since November, 1946 across Malabar. Whenever landlords attempted to collect their share and transport the paddy out of the village, the union activists intercepted it in large numbers and with force. During the first two weeks of November, there were at least five instances in which the peasant union militantly stopped the transportation of the paddy by the *janmis*. They stopped paddy's transportation, captured it, and kept it in public storage. Within the first two weeks of November, 1946, not less than 26 peasant union activists were arrested for this offence.<sup>122</sup>

Upon the complaint of the *janmis*, a large contingent of the Madras Special Police had been deployed there since November 11. They had instructed to provide police protection when the landlords requested and also the grain purchasing staff for escorting the transport of paddy out of the village.

Chirakkal Raja had a considerable extend of land in the village. There were 6000 *seers* of paddy from that village to sell in open market. He also wanted to take that paddy outside the village to sell. Several times, they went with men and a boat to transport it, but peasant union members stopped them. They also requested that the paddy be handed over to the government setup cooperative store. On December 19, 1946, the Raja of Chirakkal, Rama Varma Valiya Raja, submitted a petition to the circle inspector of police, Payyannur, for protection. He had also produced a valid permit from the supply authorities for the transportation of the grain. Then, the

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122 On November 2, 1946, when the consignment of paddy was in transit, a group of communists made an attack and took away the consignment. Nine Union members were under trial under sections 143 and 379 IPC. On November 4, another paddy transport was interfered with and captured, and three union workers were under trial. On November 14, Union stopped another transportation, and seven activists were on trial. On November 24, there was a similar protest in which seven activists were under trial. Report. District Superintendent of Police, Dated December 21, 1946. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

following morning, the sub-inspector of police went to Karivallur with a battalion of Madras Special Police along with two managers, a clerk and a peon of the Raja. There were also workers to transport the grain.<sup>123</sup> The total strength of police, as per the government records, was 48.<sup>124</sup>

When the paddy was taken out of the granaries, a group of peasant union workers arrived at the location. As per the government reports, the size of the group was said to be 300. However, the leaders of the peasant union averred that there were only 20 under village leadership of A. V Kunhambu and Krishnan Master. They were attacked by the goons of the Raja and the Madras Special Police when they were pleading with them not to take away the grain.<sup>125</sup>

As per the police report, they were determined to resist the paddy transportation, and were armed with clubs, sticks, tapper's knives and stones. When they reached the locality, they declared that they would not permit the transport of paddy out of the village. They also said that they were determined to resort to the last to see that the paddy remains in the village. Despite the police warning, they stood firm and started throwing stones at the police using coir slings. Then, the police resorted to the lathi-charge and arrested five of the union activists, including their

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123 The workers they brought were the Mappilas from Valappattanam of Kannur. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

124 Sub inspector of police of Payyannur, two Madras Special Police officers with the Jamadar rank, 44 members of the Italian, and one police constable from Payyannur police station constituted the police team. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

125 Letter. from Pillalamari Venkateswaralu, member of the Madras legislative assembly from Bezwada constituency to the Prime Minister of Madras. No date. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

prominent leaders, such as A. V Kunhambu. The lathi-charge was brutal. They were tied to the coconut trees, and police beat them up severely.

There were also instances in which the protesters fought back. It was reported that the sub-inspector of the police, Payyannur, received a blow with a stick on his right thigh and another on his hat when there was a scuffle between the police and the mob.<sup>126</sup> The police report is contradictory when it says that the injury of the arrested activists was not serious. The report of superintendent of police stated that “In the course of original lathi-charge seven among the mob were hurt, but they have all managed to make good their escape except the five who were disabled and taken to the custody.”<sup>127</sup> When the report of the sub-inspector stated that the injuries on the arrested people were not serious, the report of the district police superintendent noted that the police could arrest those who could not run away due to the injuries.

The retreated peasant union activists did not disperse; they regrouped and mobilised. This time, as the police report says, the activists from the neighbouring villages also arrived and reinforced the existing group, and started moving towards the police party. They demanded the release of the arrested activists. The first information report (FIR) with the police says that the numbers were around 1000, and they approached the police party from two different directions.<sup>128</sup> But the peasant

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126 Proceedings of the sub-divisional magistrate, Thalassery, dated December 25, 1946. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

127 Report. District superintendent of police, dated December 21, 1946. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

128 First information report of a cognisable crime reported under section 154 code of criminal procedure at Payyannur police station. No. 84/46, December 20, 1946. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

union leaders said that seeing their leaders being tied up into the coconut tree and beaten up, only another 50 more people joined.<sup>129</sup> They started pelting stones and moved towards the police. Then, the police resorted to firing. Eight rounds were fired. Eight union activists were injured and fell down. Two activists died in the police firing. Twelve heavy clubs, 36 sticks, two tapper knives, one coir sling and 180 stones were reported as seized by the police from the scene of clashes.

After this incident, police went ahead with a full suppression of the peasant union, and most of the villagers deserted their homes and went into hiding. The district collector who visited the place on December 22, 1946 noted that the inhabitants of the village, “which is almost entirely communist, have disappeared, though I understand that they are lurking in the neighbourhood just over the South Canara border”.<sup>130</sup> An order under Section 144 code of criminal procedure which prohibited the gathering of people was implemented in Karivallur, Payyannur, and four other neighbouring villages. This was also extended to Calicut, Vadakara, Thalassery, and Kannur, foreseeing the protest demonstration by the communist party. 199 people were charged under the various sections in the Karivallur case. By the end of January 1947, 182 people had been arrested.<sup>131</sup>

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129 Letter. from Pillalamari Venkateswaralu, member of Madras Legislative Assembly from Bezwada constituency, to the Prime Minister of Madras. No date. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

130 Report. District collector of Malabar to the chief secretary to the Government of Madras, December 26, 1946. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

131 Letter. District superintendent police Malabar, Calicut to inspector general of police, Madras on January 30, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

### ***Kavumbayi***

Kavumbayi is a village in Iritty. Like Karivallur, most people were peasants and land was owned by big landlords. Peasant union activities started in the locality in 1938. They began mobilising the peasants against *janmis*. The official documents depict Irikkur *firka* as a troublesome due to the peasant union and communist activities. It stated that as early as 1938, “there were enormous communist disturbances, which necessitated the stationing of special police forces in the neighbourhood, and the opening of a police station at Irikkur and an outpost at Kanhilery.”<sup>132</sup>

In Irikkur, the Karshaka Sangham obstructed the grain movement since August 1946. However, only two cases were filed against the peasant union leaders.<sup>133</sup> The government also stated that the non-communists were intimidated by the communists. Along with this, police received another piece of information that volunteer training was organised at the locality ‘to defy the authority and terrorise the neighbourhood.’<sup>134</sup> A case was also filed on the basis of this information. Three police cases were registered, and 20 union activists were charged under various section. Since they were not responding to police overtunes warrants were issued against them.

Against this background, a platoon of Madras Special Police was stationed in Irikkur on November 11, 1946, along with the sub-inspector of Thalassery police

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132 Proceedings of the joint magistrate, Thalassery, no date. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

133 The Joint Magistrate says that more cases could have been charged. However, the principal witnesses were too scared to come forward and give evidence, and it was impossible to proceed without their cooperation. Proceedings of the Joint Magistrate, Thalassery, no date. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

134 Proceedings of the joint magistrate, Thalassery, no date. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

station on special assignment. The objective of the police platoon was said to be to restore the confidence of the non-communists, maintain law and order, and arrest 20 wanted communists.

Kavumbayi was also an isolated place. There was only one road in this area, one that ran from Iritty to Irikkur. The terrain was hilly scrub jungle with broken-up rivers, streams, and paddy fields. This geographical conditions were unfavourable to the police and all their attempts to round up the agitators were unsuccessful.

There were demonstrations against the deployment of Madras Special Police in the locality organised by the peasant union and the communist party. On December 9, 1946 Madras Special Police arrested one of the local leaders of the union, M.C. Rayarappan, on an old warrant. Later that day, a crowd marched to the police outpost at Iritty, demanding the release of the activist. After the demonstration, the protesters dispersed peacefully. On December 11, the sub inspector received information that some of the wanted communists were attending a volunteer training camp organised by the communist party at Kuyiloor. He went there with the Madras Special Police, where a conflict occurred between the police and the union activists. Police resorted to lathi-charge and arrested seven peasants. The next morning, a militant protest march was organised by the peasant union to the police outpost demanding the release of the detained activists, which turned violent with a repeat of the police lathi-charge.

Then, the joint magistrate issued an order under Section 144 prohibiting the gathering and carrying of any object which could be used as a weapon. Communists were mobilised from the neighbouring villages as well. Then, the joint magistrate issued another prohibition order for the neighbouring villages of Kuttiatoor, Kandakai, Sreekandapuram, Malappattam and other places. More Madras Special Police were

deployed, and by December 29, 1946, there were five platoons in this area. Then, the police moved to Ellerenhi, which had been known as a communist stronghold. In the official documents, it was known as 'Stalingrad'. In fact, the police moved there based on information about a volunteer camp organised on a nearby hill in Kavumbayi. A police report says that the platoon moved to Ellerenhi on December 29, 1946 at 10 pm. They received information the same day that the agitators were attending the volunteer camp with a plan to attack the police outpost at Irikkur.

However, with all these police attacked the volunteer camp there was resistance from the peasant union activists. The union activists hit back at police with stones, sticks and areca-palm spears. Platoons fired 58 rounds. Police firing killed five activists and injured one. Ten activists were arrested during the raid.<sup>135</sup>

At Karivallur the police action was on the peasants who resisted extraction of surplus. There was a conflict, and it led to the police firing and killing of the peasant union activists. But at Kavumbayi, it was a planned massacre by the police. With various excuses, the police wanted to eliminate the communist presence in the village. There were no serious issues, but the police intervention took place using trivial cases as excuses to move in and suppress the communist agitators.

For a better perspective, we should know what happened in Kavumbayi in the early morning of December 30, 1946. The report of the joint magistrate discussed the police plan.

In accordance with this plan, three columns of M.S.P... set out at 5.30 am on the morning of 30/12/46. Their object was to encircle

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135 Report of the district superintendent of police, Malabar to the inspector general of police, Madras, dated January 2, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Kavumbayi Hill and round up the communists on it. One platoon...was to approach the hill from the east, skirting it on the right flank. The second platoon...was to flank the hill on the left and approach it from the west. The third platoon was to approach the hill from the south-west. First two platoons were to drive the communists off the hill...and (third platoon) was to block the route down to the paddy flats on the southwestern side of the hill.<sup>136</sup>

It is clear that a massacre was planned.

When one of the platoons was about to go to the paddy field, they met with five people standing in front of a shop. Police lathi-charged and arrested four, while one escaped and ran up the hill. The report says,

I surmise that the communists on the top of the hill were warned by the man who escaped during ...search of the shop and hence came down the hill into the paddy flat in the west of the hill, not anticipating the presence of more than one M.S.P. party in the neighbourhood and were thus surprised (by seeing another platoon at the west side).<sup>137</sup>

Clearly, the peasants did not wish to get into conflict and were trying to avoid the confrontation with the police. When the activists coming down the hill met the second platoon, they returned to the hills and hid in the bushes.

It was only when the confrontation was inevitable that peasants counter attacked the police and shouted slogans. The police said that the union activists also had guns, and they fired at least eight rounds on the police. The police had fired 58 rounds, as per the report. The fatalities were limited only because of the peculiar

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136 Proceedings of the joint magistrate, Thalassery, no date. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

137 Proceedings of the joint magistrate, Thalassery, no date. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

terrain of the hill. The report says, “The communists had the advantage of thick cover from the bushes on the hillside; accurate firing was impossible.”<sup>138</sup> The report of the joint magistrate was self-contradictory. In one part, it says,

From the fact that Jamedar Ramakrishnan heard the direction shouted to “kill the leader”, from the use of the whistle, and from the form of attack on Jamedar Ramakrishnan and the skilful use of cover by the communist during the engagements, it seems justifiable to reduce that they had some rudimentary form of training, probably at the volunteer courses.<sup>139</sup>

At the end of the report, it goes on to saying thus.

Kavumbayi hill is not high, but the sides are steep and are covered with trees in the lower reaches and thick bushes near the crest. A hostile and determined force holding the top of the hill, well-armed, would be extremely difficult to dislodge. The communist mob which the platoons...encountered cannot be accounted to well-armed.<sup>140</sup>

A letter from the district magistrate of Malabar to the chief secretary of the Government of Madras on December 26, 1946, four days prior to the police action at Kavumbayi, stated as follows.

I hope that the Karivallur incident, following closely on the two lathi-charges at Irikkur earlier in the month...will prove to be the turning point in the campaign of lawlessness which has prevailed in the north and eastern portions of Chirakkal *taluk*. I am not for a moment

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138 Proceedings of the joint magistrate, Thalassery, no date. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

139 Proceedings of the Joint Magistrate, Thalassery, no date. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

140 Proceedings of the Joint Magistrate, Thalassery, no date. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

suggesting that we should relax our vigilance; on the contrary, the communists must inevitably try to regain the prestige which they have lost in these areas. They have had a stronghold in North Malabar, and their propaganda has been so effective among the backward and ill-educated Hindus who form the bulk of the people in these parts that we must expect further small-scale outbreaks of lawlessness organised by local leaders.<sup>141</sup>

This letter concluded by saying that the major leaders like A.K. Gopalan and Azhikodan Raghavan were in custody and now the task was to round up the “resistance pockets” organised at the local level by the local leaders.<sup>142</sup> This was what happened at Kavumbayi.

What was planned at Kavumbayi was a massacre to eliminate the communist activists. On the other hand, the communist activists resorted to violence as the last option. To begin with they always tried to avoid violent conflicts.

Even after the police action at Kavumbayi, various smaller incidents of resistance were reported. On January 4, 1947 there was a conflict between Amsom Menon of Malappattam and seven peasant union members. Menon was a complainant in a case filed against the obstruction of paddy transport. On January 11, 1947, one Gopalan, in the Blathur village near Irikkur was attacked by the peasant union workers. He had assisted the police in their raid on communists and was a police

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141 Letter. From the District Magistrate of Malabar to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras dated December 26, 1946. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

142 Letter. From the District Magistrate of Malabar to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras dated December 26, 1946. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

informant.<sup>143</sup> On January 25, 1947, a Congress sympathiser who had assisted the police in locating the houses of the accused was beaten by about 15 peasant union activists in Chooliyad, a hamlet of Malappattam. On the same day at Kavumbayi village, people were also beaten on their way home by the peasant union members. Injuries were simple in both cases. In these cases, three union members were arrested, and 12 more surrendered.<sup>144</sup> On the morning of January 31, 1947 peasants at Kandakai harvested three paddy plots belonging to the *janmi*. This village was unable to be reached by the police due to its peculiar geography. It was surrounded by unbridged rivers. On February 2 night, two police informants were beaten up at Kavumbayi. One of them was murdered in the attack. The injuries, on the other informant, were severe. This incident occurred just half a mile from the Madras Special Police outpost.<sup>145</sup>

By the end of January 1947, peasant union protests slowly expanded to other areas. On January 27, seven peasant unionists obstructed the removal of paddy by the landlord in Mattannur. Communist activities were reported in Hosdrug taluk as well. Police continued the search and hunt for the communists in Payyannur. Various raids were conducted in the forests and villages with the help of informants. In some instances, isolated attacks occurred from the side of the peasant union against the raiding parties. For instance, it has been reported that on January 8, 1947, shots had

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143 Crime Number 5/47 of Thaliparamba police station, Letter. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

144 Letter. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police dated January 30, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

145 Letter. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police, dated February 3, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

been fired against the M.S.P. party, who were returning after a failed raid at an alleged communist forest camp at Payyannur.<sup>146</sup>

On March 1, 1947, *kolkaran* of Pariyaram in Payyannur was assaulted by 15 local peasant union activists. He had accompanied Madras Special Police to point out the houses of wanted communists on February 28, 1947. By the end of March, public activities of the Communists restarted in Payyannur and pockets in Irikkur such as Blathur and Malappattam. The propaganda campaign by the peasant union and collection of money for the defence in legal cases have been noted. Section 144 was extended to counter this revival of communist activities. By April, communists started getting more confident.

Some communists accused belonging to Kandakai village, who surrendered before the stationary Sub Magistrate, Kannur and were released from jail return to their village and impressed on the villagers how ineffective the forces of law and order were.<sup>147</sup>

The communist activists started to release leaflets calling for need for resistance against the police. They sought to keep the morale up. Communist activity at Perambra in Koothali estate has been noted. Posters against the police started to appear in Karivallur and Peralam.

By May, more campaigns against Madras Special Police emerged. Posters by the peasant union, reasserting their demands to cultivate the wastelands and the existing land at the rate fixed by the government and the withdrawal of Madras

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146 Letter. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police. Letter. district superintendent of police to inspector general of police., dated January 14, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

147 Report. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police on April 10, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Special Police appeared on the wall posters and tree posters of various palaces in North Malabar.<sup>148</sup> Police continuously raided the communist meetings, houses and camps to counter their activities.<sup>149</sup>

After independence, communists adopted the strategy of surrender in legal cases with the hope that the government would eventually withdraw the cases.<sup>150</sup> By September, the communist leaders started the campaign against paying *varam* to *janmis*.<sup>151</sup> This was the same campaign that caused the outbreaks of violence in the previous year. Inspector general of police who visited Malabar in March 1947; he noted:

During my visit to Payyannur and Ellaranhi, as a matter of interest, I discussed with local people... what they will all do if the Madras Special Police were to be removed. They all, with one accord, said that they would run away immediately as existence would be unsafe for them.”<sup>152</sup>

The *janmis* depended entirely on the Madras Special Police and were expecting retaliation from the communists. In this letter he addressed communists as “communist devils.”

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148 Letter. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police, dated May 14, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

149 The DSP was reported to IGP on November 4, and the details of various raids conducted by the Madras Special Police were also provided.

150 Letter. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police, dated August 30, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

151 Letter. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police, dated September 28, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

152 Letter. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police, dated March 3, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

A G.O. was issued in March 1947,<sup>153</sup> which ordered that all the communist under-trial prisoners might be treated as a special class under-trial prisoners. This G.O. increased the prestige of the communists in the district and has had a demoralising effect both on the magistracy and the police. The letter of district superintendent of police stated:

The effect of it is that any communist can break the law and even commit murder with impunity and then obtain special privileges such as he never got in his own home. Most of the under trail communists are rowdies of the worst type, and they are now given privileges far above their status...The general impression is that the government are afraid of the communists and are therefore showing them preferential treatment. As long as this policy is pursued, I doubt if it will be possible with the forces at any disposal to control the communist activities effectively in future.<sup>154</sup>

#### **4.9 Making Sense of Peasant Militancy**

On the theoretical level, the socialists demarcated themselves from the Gandhian nationalists in terms of their mode of protest as well. Socialists and later communists very often emphasised that they did not have hold adherence to non-violence. E. M. S. Nambudiripad, after the Karivallur and Kavumbayi Incidents, said:

Congressmen are, in this connection, saying that communists did this and that and committed violence and trouble. Communists are not apostles of non-violence. Here and there, they may have committed stray acts of violence. We are not believers in non-violence.<sup>155</sup>

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153 G.O Number. 822. Home Department, dated March 1, 1947, cited in G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

154 Letter. District superintendent of police to inspector general of police, dated March 19, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Besides ideological education, volunteer training camps also planned to provide physical training. In 1938, Chandroth Kunhiraman Nayar, a retired member of the police force, was put in charge of organising a volunteer camp.<sup>156</sup> However, a close look at the confrontations of peasant agitation reveals that the peasant movement avoided violent clashes in all possible instances.

Till 1940, the mass base of the peasant unions was limited. A communist leaflet, quoted by Gopalankutty, stated that only educated men joined its various units, and they had not made effective contact with elderly peasants in the villages. Another leaflet stressed the necessity of forming unions in every village.<sup>157</sup> So the peasant movement till 1930, though militant, avoided to a large extent violent conflicts. They asserted themselves against the goons of *janmi* and showed courage to challenge them. They said that they may physically confront them if necessary. However, they hardly felt such a necessity.

Things were changing in the 1940s. Lower peasantry and agricultural workers largely joined the union. They were no longer socialists and were recognised as communists. In the 1940s, it was not *janmis* or their goons, but the armed forces prepared to suppress the peasant movement.

But for every single act of violence by communists or Kisan Sabha members, there are a hundred acts of violence committed by the M.S.P and even by some congressmen. To forget these one hundred acts of

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155 E. M. S Nambutiripad, Speech at Marina Beach, Madras on January 5, 1947. Government Transcription of the Speech of E.M. Sankaran Nambutiripad, From Commissioner of Police, Madras, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, January 24, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

156 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 152.

157 Gopalankutty, 'The Peasant Movements in Malabar, 1936-1939', 383-84.

violence and speak of one act of violence is not the truth; it is falsehood, it is a lie.<sup>158</sup>

In fact, at the ideological level, it had been articulated that M.S.P was the repressive instrument of imperialism. E. M. S Nambutiripad, the stalwart Marxist leader, said:

At first, it was Malabar Special Police. It is no more so. Now, it is the Madras Special Police. At first, it was solely recruited from Malabar; today, it is recruited from Malabar, Tamil Nadu and Andhra. It is the special army of imperialism to be used against the congress, Trade Union movement, against *Kisan* movement and in Malabar even against temple entry and Harijan.”<sup>159</sup>

So, the violence by the communists and peasants was the resistance against repressive imperialism. Nambutiripad said:

It is in self-defence that communists and *Kisan* have indulged in violence. If the Madras Special Police razes your house, takes your property, rapes your wife and under these circumstances, if communists retaliate, is that violence? If this is violence, goodbye to non-violence. I do not want to conceal the few acts of violence committed by people, but I am proud of the fact that violence or non-violence, people have resisted the Madras Special Police The people will not tolerate Madras Special Police.<sup>160</sup>

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158 E. M. S Nambutiripad, Speech at Marina Beach, Madras on January 5, 1947. Government Transcription of the Speech of E.M. Sankaran Nambutiripad, From Commissioner of Police, Madras, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, January 24, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

159 E. M. S Nambutiripad, Speech at Marina Beach, Madras on January 5, 1947. Government Transcription of the Speech of E.M. Sankaran Nambutiripad, From Commissioner of Police, Madras, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, January 24, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

160 E. M. S Nambutiripad, Speech at Marina Beach, Madras on January 5, 1947. Government Transcription of the Speech of E.M. Sankaran Nambutiripad, From Commissioner of Police, Madras, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, January 24, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public

Nambutiripad also added:

I have told Prakasam (The chief minister of Madras) 'if you do not stop M.S.P atrocities, you will have to shoot down, not two or three or ten or twelve, but all the five thousand communist party members of Malabar and the 40000 *kisans* and all honest democrats in Malabar.<sup>161</sup>

However, at the organisational level, The Communist Party directed the local activists to avoid the police where they were powerful.[DM to Chief Secretary]. As we saw in Kavumbayi, though they had volunteer camps and training, they tried their best to avoid a violent clash. It was only after these incidents that they started physically encountering their opponents, especially those who helped the police in going after them.

### **Assessing Developments**

The colonial intervention in the agrarian economy, land relations and their revenue settlements generated discontent among the peasants in Malabar. Different sections of peasants existed in Malabar due to complex layers of land tenures and their interconnection with the caste hierarchy. Peasants in Malabar always had a caste and religious affiliations. Peasant movements became sites of intersection between caste hierarchies and communal relations.

In the nineteenth century, Mappila *verumpattam* tenants often contested landlords and the state. These insurgencies by the Mappilas were violent and always suppressed by the colonial government. The agitation of the *kanam* tenants started in

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Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

161 E. M. S Nambutiripad, Speech at Marina Beach, Madras on January 5, 1947. Government Transcription of the Speech of E.M. Sankaran Nambutiripad, From Commissioner of Police, Madras, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras, January 24, 1947. G.O. Number 3003 dated December 2, 1948. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 11, Serial Number 25, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

the early twentieth century under the leadership of the Nayar middle class, and led to the enactment of the Malabar Tenancy Act in 1930. These agitations did not directly confront *janmis*, but instead demanded the intervention of the colonial state.

By 1934, Congress Socialists and Communists mobilised the lower peasantry and agricultural labourers. It was the middle class political activists engaged in the national movement who took the initiative to mobilise the peasantry. In the formative years, between 1935 and 1940, the organised peasant movement encountered violence from the *janmis*. *Janmis* employed goons and resorted to judicial manipulations to suppress the peasant movement. During this period, the peasant unions employed tactics such as verbal threats, non-cooperation in agricultural work and social boycott of those who supported the *janmis*. By the 1940s, the peasant unions had established a strong link with the Communists. The colonial state and police began to intervene directly in the activities of peasant unions. Following World War II, the colonial state undertook intense police actions targeting the peasant movement. Concurrently, the communist leadership attempted to distinguish the Communist Party (CPI) from Indian National Congress. The abandoning of Gandhian non-violence as a method of protest distinguished the Communists from the Congress.

From 1940 to 1947, peasants inhabited a political landscape in which violence was evident both in the material and ideological domains. A closer examination of the peasants' involvement in political activities and violent events during the peasant movements in Karivallur and Kavumbayi reveals that the peasantry's consciousness underwent significant changes during this period. Despite this overwhelming presence of violence in ideological and material domains of their everyday actions, the lower

peasantry often tried to avoid violent conflicts. Their militancy was expressed in determined struggles, but did not depend upon violence.

The early peasant movement by the *kanam* tenants was an attempt to establish their authority over land. However, the peasant movement, under the peasant union, focused more on the customary levies and tributes, as well as the embedded subordination of the lower peasantry to the *janmis*. In this way, union activities also carried out an anti-caste struggle within the sphere of the peasant movement. It was in this context that Menon argued that the peasant union could effectively undermine the “erstwhile structure of caste authority.”<sup>162</sup> Contestations by the lower peasantry were also a social movement which facilitated social mobility. The nature of that transition was determined by the consciousness appropriated by the lower peasantry and agricultural labourers through their engagement in the political action. While the peasant movement subverted pre-modern affiliations, the tendency to transcend caste and religious affiliations was evident to a greater degree in the workers’ movement, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

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162 Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*, 157.

## Chapter 5

### Workers, Trade Unions and Strikes

This chapter examines industrial conflicts and the dynamics of violence in the workers' strikes in Malabar from 1935 to 1947. Industrial strikes in Malabar were inseparable from the dynamics of the national movement. The effort of the Congress socialist to mobilise the workers, raising the trade union demands, reflected or reshaped the consciousness of the political movement.

The class character and the political consciousness of the Indian working class have been a point of discussion in Indian labour history, especially since the 1980s. Such enquiries emerged in the global context of emerging social histories, which tried to find the intricacies in the 'class' consciousness and its cultural derivatives. These studies questioned the earlier Marxist histories of linearly progressing class consciousness. Thompson's pioneering study examined the pre-modern origin of the English working-class consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Many studies emerged in Europe engaging with the Thompsons' studies, which questioned the class character of the working-class culture.<sup>2</sup> These studies tried to emphasise the ambiguities of the working-class consciousness.<sup>3</sup> The work of Dipesh Chakrabarty on the jute-mill workers of Bengal marked a historiographical shift in the history of the working-class movement in

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1 Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1966).

2 Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982* (New York, 1983); William H. Sewell, Jr, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labour from the Old Regime to 1848* (New York, 1980).

3 Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories* (Delhi, 2003).

India.<sup>4</sup> He argued that the pre-modern values of religion and culture were embedded within the working-class consciousness, and nothing was ‘political’ about it.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter aims to locate the workers’ actions during industrial struggles. By examining the dynamics of militancy in workers’ strikes, it seeks to understand the evolving political consciousness among the workers of colonial Malabar.

## 5.1 Urbanisation and Industrialisation in Malabar

Urbanisation in Malabar and Kerala, during both the colonial and post-colonial periods, represented a unique process.<sup>6</sup> Urban spaces in Malabar did not develop into high-density areas with a concentration of capital and deep social segregation. The evenly distributed towns in Malabar often blurred the distinction between urban and rural areas.<sup>7</sup> Yet, different urban spaces with their socio-cultural connotations emerged in colonial Malabar.

In the pre-colonial period, Calicut, Ponnani, and Thalassery were important towns in Malabar. These towns developed in the coastal areas in the context of thriving maritime trade networks, where Calicut also served as the centre of the Zamorin kingdom. In addition to these, many different towns existed in Malabar that were collections of local markets or trading centres. During the colonial period,

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4 Sumit Sarkar, ‘Labour History in India and South Africa: Some Affinities and Contrasts’, *African Studies* 66, nos 2–3 (2007): 194, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020180701482685>.

5 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890-1940* (Delhi, 1989).

6 For instance See, Arya V and Rejuna C A, ‘Unveiling Kerala’s Distinct Urbanisation: A Comparative Analysis within India’, *The Indian Economic Journal*, 9 October 2024, 00194662241278066, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00194662241278066>; T. T. Sreekumar, ‘Neither Rural nor Urban: Spatial Formation and Development Process’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 35/36 (1990): 1981–90; Mridul Eapen, *Rural Industrialisation in Kerala: Its Dynamics and Local Linkages*, Working Paper no. 348 (Centre for Development Studies, 2003).

7 V Sankaranarayanan, *Urbanisation in Kerala and Tamil Nadu: Some Contrasts*, Working Paper no. 57 (Centre for Development Studies, 1977).

Calicut and Thalassery in Kannur emerged as the prominent urban centres in Malabar. Calicut emerged as the administrative capital of the Malabar district. Thalassery, where the British established their first fort in Malabar in 1708 for the spice trade, had by the late nineteenth century achieved many of the urban characteristics, serving as the headquarters of the North Malabar division of the Malabar administration, with an office of sub-collector and a cantonment. It was also an important centre for economic and cultural activities.

Madras Presidency was the least industrialised presidency during the nineteenth century. There was very little Indian capital investment until the onset of the Great Depression in the 1920s.<sup>8</sup> The Malabar district did not have large industrial establishments or an industrial society during the colonial period. However, in Malabar, small-scale industries began to emerge in the mid-nineteenth century. A transition from traditional craft making to factory production occurred with the intervention of missionary activities, especially by the Basel Evangelical Mission. Industrial establishments developed by the Basel Evangelical Mission aimed to employ the native converts to Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

The Hindu converts to Christianity found it difficult to survive within the traditional, caste based production process, and the missionaries had to find

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8 Rajat Kanta Ray, *Industrialization in India: Growth and Conflict in the Private Corporate Sector, 1914-47* (Delhi, 1979), 29.

9 The Basel Mission arrived in Calicut in 1834 but soon relocated to Mangalore, establishing its headquarters there. Their activities started in Kannur and Thalassery in 1841 and expanded to Calicut in the following year. By the second half of the century, they expanded further south of Malabar, starting activities in Kodakkal near Ponnani (1857), Palakkad (1858), Vaniyamkulam (1886), and Manjeri (1907). Jaiprakash Raghaviah, *Basel Mission Industries in Malabar and South Canara (1834 - 1914): A Study of Its Social and Economic Impact* (New Delhi, 1990), 12.

alternative employment for them to guide them into Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Along with this immediate necessity, the Calvinist ideology recognised social achievements as also part of the religious principle. Transforming natives into a ‘civilised’ and ‘productive’ life was the goal of the missionary activity. The establishment of industries and the disciplining of labour became part of the philanthropic endeavour.<sup>11</sup>

The early attempt by the Basel Mission was to establish agricultural entrepreneurship. They attempted to develop coffee plantations, purchased paddy lands, and allocated them to the converted Christians for cultivation. In 1852, they bought 500 acres of paddy land near Kodakkal and cultivated the land with converts from the Cherumas.<sup>12</sup> But these attempts were not successful. Then they attempted to enter the craft production. The earlier attempt by the Basel Mission in craft production was an effort to provide training in traditional crafts, such as carpentry and weaving. They established a carpentry school in Calicut in 1852. They also attempted to introduce modern crafts, such as clockmaking.<sup>13</sup> In the next stage of industrial establishment by the Basel mission, a weaving establishment was established across Malabar from 1852 to 1881. These were not in the traditional way, but these establishments implemented modern technologies in weaving processes. The introduction of the flying shuttle and frame looms, rather than the conventional pit

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10 Early missionaries noted that it was difficult for the converts to stay within the same production relations. Raghavaiah had quoted the early missionaries who spoke of the miseries of Christian converts, who became outcasts from their community and traditional occupations. See Raghavaiah, *Basel Mission Industries in Malabar and South Canara*, 21–22.

11 For instance see, Amal Shahid, ‘The Basel Mission Weaving Establishment in Malabar: Work Discipline and Resistance C. 1840-1910’, *Annals of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi* 57, no. 2 (2023): 51–72.

12 Jaiprakash Raghavaiah, *Faith and Industrial Reformation: Basel Mission in Malabar and South Canara* (New Delhi, 2018), 118.

13 Raghavaiah, *Faith and Industrial Reformation*, 119–22.

looms, transformed weaving from a cottage industry to factory production.<sup>14</sup> The introduction of chemical dyes for colouring cloth initiated the establishment of dye houses. Between 1852 and 1880, the Basel Mission established four weaving industries and one dye house in the Malabar region. Kannur (1852), Calicut (1859), Chombala, a branch of Kannur establishment (1860), Kodakkal, a branch of Calicut (1860), were these establishments. The dye house was established at Koyilandy, near Calicut.<sup>15</sup>

In 1882, the industrial activities of the Basel mission were transferred to the Mission Trading Company, a joint-stock company. This ensured the inflow of capital to the industrial establishment. By this time, the British government was stabilised in Malabar, and the initiation of public works and government infrastructure created a demand for tiles. The traditional technologies and the tile makers were unable to meet this demand. Mission used these opportunities and established tile factories in Calicut (1873), Kodakkal (1887), Palakkad (1887), and Feroke near Calicut (1905).

In its initial period, the Basel Mission received support from the British government in India. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the interests of British capitalism had come into conflict with the industrial activities of the Basel Mission. World War I further intensified the conflict between England and Germany, and was reflected in the antagonistic nature of the relationship. Through various stages, the British companies took over the assets of the Basel mission.<sup>16</sup> In 1920, the

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14 Raghaviah, *Faith and Industrial Reformation*, 124.

15 Raghaviah, *Faith and Industrial Reformation*, 125–26.

16 In 1915, the assets of the Mission Trading Society were placed under an official in the British administration. In 1916, J. P. Werner and Company, a company based in England, took over the affairs of the Basel Mission industries. The Enemy Trading Act of 1916 prohibited the trading by hostile nationals. Since then, the entire establishment was kept under the Custodian of Enemy Properties. In 1919, the whole assets of the Basel Mission in India were taken over by the British Indian Government. They formed a Trust called

British-registered company Commonwealth Trust Limited took over the entire industrial establishment from the Mission Trading Company.

Production of crafts in pre-colonial Malabar was done by specialised caste groups. For instance, the Chaliya caste was engaged in weaving, while the Kusavas were the tile makers. However, the emergence of industrial production altered the connotation of caste occupations. In 1913, Basel mission industries employed 3633 workers, where almost 73 per cent were members of the Basel Mission Church.<sup>17</sup> The Basel Mission was earlier focused on the Thiyya community in Malabar. Among the total converts in 1893, Thiyyas constituted 45.5 per cent. Cherumas were the second largest convert amounting to 28.4 per cent. There were also the converted Christians from Nayars (4.9 per cent) and other occupational castes.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the social background of the workers employed in these factories was primarily comprised of Thiyyas and Dalit castes. In this way, the spatial setup of the industry itself provided a new identity different from the caste for the workers.

Along with the Basel Mission, the colonial state also intervened in industrial development in Madras. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the British Government in Madras realised the importance of the state's support in the development of the indigenous industries. In 1905, Lord Morley, Secretary of State for India, who was sceptical about the economic reasons for Madras's industrial backwardness, established a Department of Industrial and Technical Enquiries and appointed Alfred Chatterton as the head of the department. This was a temporary

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Mission Trust of South India. See, Raghaviah, *Faith and Industrial Reformation*, 150–53.

17 Raghaviah, *Faith and Industrial Reformation*, 138.

18 Data obtained from the source, Rudolf Fischer, *The Basel Mission Industries 1850-1913*, as quoted in the Raghaviah, *Basel Mission Industries in Malabar and South Canara*, 22.

establishment, and the duration of this department was five years.<sup>19</sup> In 1908, an Industrial conference was held at Ooty. Despite the opposition of the Madras Chamber of Commerce and the European mercantile community, Madras government initiated measures to support indigenous industrial development. During the inter-war period, the colonial government was pressured to initiate proactive measures on the internal economy. The emergence of 'drain theory' exposed the ways in which the British administrative policies exploited the Indian economy, and the Swadeshi Movement emphasised the need for policy reversal to support the internal economy.<sup>20</sup> The investment in the roads and hydroelectric projects in the early twentieth century had to be seen in this context.<sup>21</sup>

Scholars have also noted that internal conflicts existed within the industrial establishment of the Basel mission and the Christian congregation. With the establishment of the large factories, there was an attempt to discipline the workers. Such intervention created conflicts, and as early as 1901, in the weaving factory of Kannur, all workers walked out in protest against the manager's refusal to provide higher wages for their new design.<sup>22</sup> There were also counter church activities against the Basel mission. For instance, Volbrecht Nagel, a former Basel missionary who dissociated with them over theological differences, settled in Kannur, marrying a local woman in the early twentieth century. Many of the dissatisfied workers had joined his

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19 Padmini Swaminathan, 'State Intervention in Industrialisation: A Case Study of the Madras Presidency', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 29, no. 4 (1992): 483.

20 Christopher Baker, 'Colonial Rule and the Internal Economy in Twentieth-Century Madras', *Modern Asian Studies* 15, no. 3 (1981): 576.

21 For details see, Sunila S. Kale, 'Structures of Power: Electrification in Colonial India', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34, no. 3 (2014): 454–75.

22 Raghaviah, *Faith and Industrial Reformation*, 146.

new congregation. In this context, those who left the Basel mission began to establish the weaving factories, especially in the part of Kannur.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, indigenous capitalists also started establishing factories in Malabar. The anti-colonial struggles provided a conceptual base for Indigenous entrepreneurs. For instance, one of the prominent indigenous capitalists who established several industries under Aaron & Sons Co. Ltd., Samuel Aaron, was a prominent Congress leader of the locality. There were many other small scale industries by the indigenous capitalists.<sup>24</sup> The demands for the native capitalists to invest in the industries and the support from the British government in Madras have led to an increase in the number of factories in Malabar since the 1930s. There were 25 textile and 60 tile and brick factories in Malabar in 1933.<sup>25</sup> Another prominent industry was the Beedi industry, which emerged in every part of Malabar after World War I. Various other factories, such as the Kerala Soap Factory at Calicut and the Fish Oil factory at Calicut, as well as umbrella factories, were also established during this period. There were also other workers, such as scavengers and motor drivers, in Malabar.

## 5.2 Urban Spaces and Anti-Colonial Politics

Looking at the modern Malayalam literature, Menon argued that the Malayalam novels of the twentieth century portray an imagination of an egalitarian urban space where “social mobility is marked by spatial mobility.”<sup>26</sup> Many of the Novels

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23 Raghaviah, *Faith and Industrial Reformation*, 147–48.

24 Pushparaj Match Factory, Ottappalam Match Factory and Malabar Weaving Factory were the other industries owned by the indigenous entrepreneurs in the First half of the twentieth century

25 *Almanack And Directory of Madras and Southern India 1935* (Madras, 1935), 822–24.

26 Dilip M. Menon, ‘A Place Elsewhere, Lower-Caste Malayalam Novels of the Nineteenth Century’, in *India’s Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Stuart H. Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia (Delhi, 2008), 500.

represented villages as the space for the caste hierarchy and inequality, cities were portrayed as the “transformative spaces in which new individuals can be forged as subjects unmarked by subjections.”<sup>27</sup> In contrast to this middle-class literary imagination, Arunima argued that the urban spaces in the nineteenth century had a sense of “caste and religious markings.”<sup>28</sup> By the twentieth century, the various sections of labourers constituted the subaltern groups within these urban spaces. An imagination of urban space as a transformative space made such spaces the centres of political movements. At the same time, the reality of societal segregation within the space created confrontations in the spatiality. The new political ideas were an attempt to accommodate the subalterns, especially the working sections of society, into the spatial imagination of the transformative urban space. In this way, the urban centres of Malabar, especially Calicut and Kannur/Thalassery, emerged as the centre stage of middle-class activities and the public sphere in colonial Malabar.<sup>29</sup> New political consciousness and political programmes emerged from these cities. The industrial establishments in Malabar developed in these urban emerging urban centres and their peripheries.

Method of political agitations in Malabar changed in the 1930s. The Civil Disobedience Movement 1930-34 in Malabar included salt marches, *satyagraha*, *khadi* programmes, anti-liquor agitations, and temple entry movements. Though the

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27 Menon, ‘A Place Elsewhere, Lower-Caste Malayalam Novels of the Nineteenth Century’, 500.

28 G. Arunima, *Spaces, Bodies, Absences: Some Questions While Writing a History of Trivandrum, Ca 1800 – 1930*, Working Paper (Kerala Council for Historical Research, 2011), 12.

29 K. Sreejith, *The Middle Class in Colonial Malabar: A Social History* (New Delhi, 2021), 32–39.

popular base of these protests was limited to the Nayar caste,<sup>30</sup> the class character changed from the traditional aristocracy to the middle class. These agitations were aimed at mass mobilisation in favour of the national movement and envisioned unity. The emergence of Congress socialism and then the transition to communism contributed to the mobilisation of peasants and workers, and they strived to attain unity based on interests cutting across the caste and religious lines.

The experience of the previous Non-Cooperation-Khilafat movements, which culminated in the Malabar rebellion, made the older generation of the Congress to decide against any intensive agitations in Malabar. However, the young members of the Congress under K. Kelappan decided to launch the movement in Malabar. But they also decided to avoid the rebellion-affected areas.<sup>31</sup> Congress leadership planned the civil disobedience in a way that avoided confrontation with the police. The salt satyagraha, and a forest satyagraha organised at the Kadakam Reserve Forest, Kannur in May, 1932, were the only two agitations directly violating the law.<sup>32</sup> However, civil disobedience movement created an atmosphere of political struggle in the urban pockets of Malabar, and protest, though confined within the Gandhian non-violence, created a militancy different from the last two decades. Since 1934, emerging socialist group within the Congress realised the necessity of mobilising workers and peasants.

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30 Dilip M. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar, 1900-1948* (Cambridge, 2008).

31 K. Gopalankutty, 'Mobilisation against the State and Not against the Landlords: The Civil Disobedience Movement in Malabar', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 26, no. 4 (1989): 460.

32 Forest *sathyagraha* started in May 1932. The Congress volunteers marched from Kannur to Kadakam Reserve Forest and began to cut down trees in the forest. The forest was named Kasargod Taluk Congress Reserve Forest. A nearby forest bungalow was renamed Congress Mandir, and the satyagrahis hoisted the national flag there. "Despite *lathi* charges and arrests, the forest *satyagraha* continues up to December 1932, and around 430 trees had been cut down and a few sandalwood trees sold in the auction." See, Gopalankutty, 'Mobilisation against the State and Not against the Landlords', 468.

Emergence of modern political organisations and political programmes to engage with the modern state transformed the form of politics. This transformation of the political subjects, with a broader understanding of freedom, equality and rights, internalised militancy. The method of political struggles and the change in the slogans illustrate this change. Such a transformation can be seen in the differences in the slogans and the marching songs written by congress leaders and used in different movements since 1930.

*Varika Varika Shachare* a song written by Amshi Narayana Pilla (1896-1981) was extensively used as a marching song in most of the salt marches during this period.<sup>33</sup> This song was banned by the government in Malabar, Cochin and Travancore. Amshi wrote this song probably inspiring from an earlier version, starting with the same lines written by Panavally Krishna Vaidyar (1877-1937)<sup>34</sup> during the historic Vaikom satyagraha (April 1, 1924 to November 23, 1925).<sup>35</sup> This song was

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33 Amshi Narayana Pilla was a congress activist from Travancore, and he and other volunteers marched from Travancore to Calicut to join the salt march at Calicut. By then, this song was also popular among most parts of the Malabar.

34 Panavally Krishna Vaidyar, also known as C. Krishna Vaidyar was a social reformer and activist from the Ezhava community in Travancore. He was also a famous traditional Ayurvedic practitioner. He was a member of the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly for 1914, 1915, 1916, 1924 and 1931. He was also a follower of Sree Narayana Guru and actively participated in the Vaikom Satyagraha. For a more detailed biographical sketch, see, Parvathy G. Nair, Deep Valiparambil Chandran, Krishnakumar Venugopal, and Aswathi Mohan Pattona, 'Life Profile of Panavally C. Krishnan Vaidyan: His Enduring Journey as a Social Reformer and Healer', *Journal of Research in Ayurvedic Sciences* 9, no. 5 (2025): 197–206, [https://doi.org/10.4103/jras.jras\\_316\\_25](https://doi.org/10.4103/jras.jras_316_25).

35 The Vaikom Satyagraha in the princely state of Travancore was a protest organised by upper-caste Hindus, Ezhavas, and others for the rights of the untouchables to walk through the roads encircling the outer wall of the Brahmin temple at Vaikom. Vaikom Satyagraha was extensively studied for its prolonged non-violent satyagraha method. Gandhi, Periyar, Rajagopalachari, and many other prominent national leaders participated in this protest. Gandhi led the negotiation between the Brahmins at Vaikom. After 20 months of non-violent satyagraha, the protest was ended as per a settlement that a new road would be constructed around the temple for the untouchables to access. For details, see, Mary Elizabeth King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle and Untouchability in South India: The 1924-25 Vykam Satyagraha and the Mechanisms of Change*, First edition (New Delhi, 2015).

very popular among the social activists and Congressmen. As C. Kesavan, the Congress leader and former chief minister of Travancore-Cochin between 1950 and 1952, recollected in his autobiography,

We participated in the campaign to collect food grains singing songs. I was leading these groups with intense and enthusiastic battle songs. I still remember one or two of those. There was one protest song by Panavalliyil Krishnan Vaidyar, song starts with the lines ‘*Varika Varika Sahachare*’.<sup>36</sup>

Then, he recollected a few lines of the songs as well. But what changed in 1930, when Amshi wrote a song with the same structure and form, was its theme, tone, and mood. The earlier version of this song insisted on the equality of all people irrespective of caste. This song asks the people to unite for their dream of caste equality without disappointment. When Amshi wrote the poem in the context of civil disobedience, the song became more militant. It asked people to unite against the British.

Frighten the Britain  
Change the rules  
Don't let the cruel law do  
Rule the world anymore.<sup>37</sup>

And the method of fight was articulated as braveness to tolerate any pain induced by the British. It said:

Let them beat; let them fire  
Let us wipe it off

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36 C. Kesavan, *Jeevitha Samaram* (Kozhikode, 2015), 71. Translation mine.

37 *Varika Varika Sahachare* have various adaptations. The version used here is the original song written and published by Amshi Narayana Pilla himself. This would be the version used by the volunteers of the Civil Disobedience Movement. Amshi Narayana Pilla, *Varika Varika Sahachare Padayaliyude Pattukal (Songs of a Warrior)* (Thengapattanam, n.d.). Translation mine.

Face them with a smile.<sup>38</sup>

The word used to refer to the method of struggle was neither ‘satyagraha’ nor ‘ahimsa’, two common words for non-violence. But the word used was ‘sahanam’, which means tolerance or patience. This song called for an uncompromising fight against the British with patience and tolerance in a non-violent way. It said:

If they take us to jail,  
Thank them for their goodness.  
If the viceroy himself comes and fires with the giant gun,  
Show your chest with tolerance.<sup>39</sup>

In the second stage of Civil Disobedience, songs and slogans became more vigorous. While talking about the picketing agitations that strengthened after the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, E.M.S. Nambutiripad who was a young Congress member then said:

There was one more significance for this (picketing struggles). We used more militant slogans and songs than in the earlier public meetings and marches. A view of socialism rather than that of non-violent satyagraha. The leaders of these struggles expressed their dissatisfaction with the pact and impatience for uncompromising struggles that transferred to us.<sup>40</sup>

It was this consciousness that further developed in the 1940s into a much more vigorous response.

The slogans and poems in the 1940s were more radical. For instance, there was a protest march from Kondotty to Mongam in Eranad *taluk* in 1944 to destroy the

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38 Pilla, *Varika Varika Sahachare Padayaliyude Pattukal (Songs of a Warrior)*. Translation mine.

39 Pilla, *Varika Varika Sahachare Padayaliyude Pattukal (Songs of a Warrior)*. Translation mine.

40 E. M. S Nambutirippad, *Aathmakatha* (Thiruvananthapuram, 2015), 132. Translation mine.

memorial of R. H. Hitchcock, the district superintendent of police during the Malabar rebellion, who led the police action against the Mappilas of Malabar. There was a popular memory of the atrocities committed by him, especially in Eranad and Valluvanad taluks, where the rebellion was most active. After the rebellion, the government constructed a memorial for him on a road near Mongam. Sentiments against this statue were aroused in the 1940s, in a context in which ordinary people developed a new political subjectivity.

Kambalath Govindan Nayar (1914-1983),<sup>41</sup> a Congress activist and poet, wrote a song against the Hitchcock Memorial at Mongam. This song was published in the communist weekly, *Deshabhimani*, in 1944. The colonial government banned this song and *Deshabhimani* for publishing it.<sup>42</sup> This song told the story of the Malabar rebellion from the perspective of the people who engaged in it. The memory of the rebellion was recollected with honour and pride. The song starts as: ‘*Long ago in 1921, In this Malayalam land. We resisted the Whites ably.*’ The poem goes on like this: ‘*The brave children of Eranad spilt their blood here; They faced the roaring cannons.*’ The cause of the rebellion was articulated as: ‘*We didn’t let the janmis/ take away our food grain; That is the reason for the fight; We didn’t let the British take our money to England; That is the reason for this bloody fight.*’<sup>43</sup>

This poem, in short words but in sharp language, recollects the harrowing reality of the British atrocities before and during the rebellion. It said that the British

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41 Kambalath Govindan Nayar was born in Nediyruppu near Kondotty. He has been a school teacher since 1930. He was a Congress socialist initially and then joined the Communist Party. For more biographical sketch, see Shebeen Mehboob, *Kambalathum Eranattin Dheeramakkalum: Kambalath Govindan Nayarude Ezhuthum, Samaravum, Jeevithavum* (Varkkala, 2021).

42 V.M. Kutty, *Kanivum Ninavum: Ormakkurippukal* (Kozhikode, 2010), 71.

43 This poem was taken from the reprinted version in Mehboob, *Kambalathum Eranattin Dheeramakkalum*, 20–21. Translation mine.

rule for decades had destroyed the prosperity of the land, the honour of women and massacred the people with their muscles and guns. It was in that context that the brave folks fought against them. Then, during the rebellion, the British hanged their fathers, molested their mothers and sisters and tortured the grandfathers, hammering nails into their feet and pulling out their beards. The memory of the transportation of the rebellion convicts to Andaman Islands and the wagon tragedy of 1921<sup>44</sup> was recalled.

This poem connected all those who suffered and fought in the rebellion as the ancestors of people who were living currently. The words used to describe those who suffered and resisted were ‘our fathers,’ ‘our mothers,’ ‘younger brothers of our fathers,’ ‘elder brothers of our fathers,’ and ‘our grandfathers.’ Then the poem says:

While travelling towards Mongam,  
Five or six miles away from Manjeri,  
Travellers can see on the road,  
The Hitchcock’s Memorial,  
Statue of that bitch,  
Like a demon’s statue.  
That rock actually pierces in our chest.  
That donkey killed our beloveds.<sup>45</sup>

This poem ends with a warning to the British. The descendants of that old generation are brave patriots, and it would be better for the British to run back to England if they wanted to be safe from their anger.

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44 The wagon tragedy was one of the biggest massacres that occurred in colonial India. The British used a luggage wagon on a train to transport the convicts of the Malabar rebellion from Tirur to Bellary jail. On November 19, 1921, at 7:15 pm, one hundred convicts were crammed into a single wagon with no air circulation. When the train reached Pothannur at 12.30 am, 56 convicts died from suffocation. In the following days, an additional fourteen convicts also died bringing the total death to 70. The harrowing experiences endured in the tightly packed closed wagon were widely shared and became a part of the popular narratives surrounding the Malabar rebellion.

45 Mehboob, Kambalathum Eranattin Dheeramakkalum, 20–21. Translation mine.

The poem was a call for a political action to destroy Hitchcock's Memorial. The genre of this poem resembles the *padappatt* (war songs) of the Mappila literature. This songs would be the first popular basis of an alternative history of the Malabar rebellion. Malabar rebellion was articulated as a brave resistance of the people of Malabar against the cruelty of British rule.

The British administration constructed the Hitchcock Memorial in 1927 with the support of the Mappilas, who were aligned with the British government. Various protests have emerged against this memorial since then. In 1938, a committee was formed against the Hichcock memorial, with Muhammad Abdurahiman as president and T. Muhammad Yusuf as secretary. They met Rajagopalachari, the Prime Minister of the Congress ministry of Madras province.<sup>46</sup> Since the beginning of the 1940s, there have been popular sentiments among the natives intensified that they wanted to remove the Memorial of Hitchcock. They have submitted various complaints to the Government of Madras. There was also a counter-complaint against removal.<sup>47</sup> In 1944, a public meeting was held at Pulikkal near Kondotty to condemn the government's inaction on the complaints given by the natives about removing the memorial statue of Hitchcock. After the public address by K.C Komukutty Moulavi, people started singing the above song together. Then, they started moving to Mongam as a *jatha* (procession) to destroy the memorial.

The protesters are going to destroy the memorial. Then, the army will be firing at them. All the episodes of 1921 in Pookkottur and Thirurangadi will repeat. People were so afraid. Nevertheless, no one

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46 S. K. Pottekkatt, ed., *Muhammad Abdurahman* (Kozhikode, 1978), 279.

47 Answer to the question of K.M. Seethi Sahib in the Madras Legislative Assembly dated August 24, 1946. Madras Records (Public), 118, dated January 16, 1947, Bundle No. 8, Serial. No. 7, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

stopped them. They marched quickly, singing this song. The mother of Pandikkadan Muhammad Master (One of the activists in the procession) ran to the crowd crying: ‘Did he leave? He is the only boy I have.’ My father consoled her, saying: ‘Many others were also there. They went for a good reason.’ People around her also consoled her. Then, we saw a car with the Congress flag rushing toward Mongam. Those were the Congress leaders from Calicut. Around noon, a bus came from the side where the protesters marched. The driver told the crowd that a huge army was camped at Mongam: ‘The Congress leaders from Calicut stopped the procession at Nediyrupp.’ They have asked the march to disperse. They are coming back. Then a few volunteers got off the bus.<sup>48</sup>

Many nationalist poems and literature emerged in Malayalam literature during the first half of the twentieth century. Most of the time, literature, especially poems, remained within the newly literate sections of society.<sup>49</sup> However, the two poems discussed above were widely used in the popular movements or the protest resistance. There were other such poems as well. Renowned communist poet and songwriter P. Bhaskaran (1924-2007) wrote another poem, which became popular among the people of Malabar, especially in the Eranad and Valluvanad taluks. His song was also about the historic valour of the Malabar Rebellion. This song appreciates the bravery of the young Muslims who took up the sword and faced the cannons to protect the honour of their land. The song ends with the lines:

We will never forget the method of your brave struggle  
We sing this heroic song

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48 Kutty, *Kanivum Ninavum*, 71–74.

49 K. K.N. Kurup, ‘Nationalism and Social Change—The Role of Poetry in Malayalam’, *Indian Historical Review* 26, no. 2 (1999): 84.

With brave memories in our blood.<sup>50</sup>

The use of the existing narrative styles and the use of vivid language made them attractive during the specific context of protests.

In the 1930s, mass political struggles emerged in Malabar. A new political consciousness was shaping up, which was militant and derived its orientation from the previous violent conflicts with the British. *Varika varika sahachare* was widely circulated during civil disobedience. It reflected the militancy but demanded a disciplined effort for tolerance. By the 1940s, that consciousness had evolved, and militancy and the use of force now been considered necessary for challenging the British. At the same time, such militancy was mitigated through the intervention of the organisations, as we saw in Kondotty in 1944.

### 5.3 Trade Unions and the Mobilisation of the Workers

Industrial employment allowed the lower castes to move out of the rigid caste system of rural Malabar. Nevertheless, caste functioned as an informal structure within the industrial setup until the effective trade unionisation during 1935-40. The earlier discontent among the industrial workers reflected solidarities based on caste identity.<sup>51</sup>

On a question by the Indian Statutory Commission of 1929 about approximate wages paid to industrial workers in the presidency, the labour commissioner replied that there was no standardisation of wages or work.

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50 Poem republished in Vallanchira Muhammedali, ed., *Manjeri Local History* (Manjeri Municipal Council, 2015), 82. Translation mine.

51 David Arnold, 'Industrial Violence in Colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 2 (1980): 234–55.

K. N. Panikkar, *Essays on the History and Society of Kerala*, First edition (Thiruvanthapuram, 2016), 149.

It is extremely difficult to say whether two workmen of the same designation in factories are really doing the same kind of work and whether they are receiving different pay for it.<sup>52</sup>

This was the same in Malabar as well. For instance, there were huge disparities in the wages paid to Malabar sub-jail scavengers. There were 19 sub-jails under the Madras Presidency in Malabar in 1930, and the annual allowance varied from 24 rupees in Thaliparamba sub jail to 144 rupees in Manathavady sub-jail.<sup>53</sup>

The willingness of the colonial state, especially since the 1920s, to intervene in the internal contracts of industrial setups, such as wages and working hours, was changing the worker consciousness in colonial India. The ‘protective component’ of legislative interventions, such as the Indian Trade Union Act of 1926 and the Factory Act of 1934, operated so that the workers began to gain “a new and distinct status within the larger rubric of colonial policy.”<sup>54</sup> This opened up an arena for the collectivity of workers in the industries. The South Indian Railway strike in 1928 ignited a sense of solidarity not only among railway workers but also among workers across different industries. This also reminded them of the urgency of mobilisation. The first union registered in the Madras presidency from Malabar under the Indian Trade Union Act of 1926 was The Commonwealth Trust Tile Workers union, Feroke

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52 Answer of Mr. S. H. Slater, Labour Commissioner of Madras, to the fourth meeting of the Statutory Commission dated February 21, 1929. Fourth meeting of the Commission. 1929. Indian Office Records, IOR/Q/13/1/34, British Library, London.

53 Revenue R-Dis 8495/30 dated November 12, 1930. Bundle number 348, serial number 14, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

54 Maya John, ‘Regulating the “Half-Timer” in Colonial India: Factory Legislation, Its Anomalies and Resistance’, in *Law and Time*, ed. Siân Maeve Beynon-Jones and Emily Grabham, Social Justice (New York, 2019), 169.

on October 13, 1931.<sup>55</sup> The Standard Tile and Clay Workers Union, Feroke, was registered in December of the same year.<sup>56</sup>

Congress leaders started mobilising workers in 1932. In 1935, the Congress Socialist Party and its leaders, like K. Krishna Pilla and N.C. Shekhar started mobilising workers. The unions formed in this period had the character of a 'revolutionary collective organisation.'<sup>57</sup> However, E.M.S. Nambudirippad argued that the working class became an organised force only by 1937.<sup>58</sup> At that time, a number of local trade unions formed in various places. There were only five trade unions registered under the Trade Union Act of 1926 in 1937.<sup>59</sup> The number remained the same in the following year.<sup>60</sup> By 1940, there were 12 registered trade unions in Malabar. The number of registered trade union members increased from 862 in 1937 to 3113 in 1940.<sup>61</sup> While in 1937, the registered women workers were 173, which constituted 20 per cent of the total registered trade union members, in 1940, it reduced to 95, just constituting around three per cent.<sup>62</sup>

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55 Annual report on the working of the Indian Trade Unions Act 1926. Madras, Labour Department, 1936/37-1939/40. Indian Office Records, IOR/V/24/4296. British Library, London.

56 Annual report on the working of the Indian Trade Unions Act 1926. Madras, Labour Department. Indian Office Records, IOR/V/24/4296, British Library, London.

57 K. Ramachandran Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala* (Thiruvananthapuram, 2006), 465.

58 Nambudirippad, *Aathmakatha*, 248.

59 Return of the Trade Union Registers at the close of the year 1936-37, Annual report on the working of the Indian Trade Unions Act 1926. Madras, Labour Department. Indian Office Records, IOR/V/24/4296, British Library, London.

60 Return of the Trade Union Registers at the close of the year 1937-38, Annual report on the working of the Indian Trade Unions Act 1926. Madras, Labour Department. Indian Office Records, IOR/V/24/4296, British Library, London.

61 Annual report on the working of the Indian Trade Unions Act 1926. Madras, Labour Department. Indian Office Records, IOR/V/24/4296, British Library, London.

62 Annual report on the working of the Indian Trade Unions Act 1926. Madras, Labour Department. Indian Office Records, IOR/V/24/4296, British Library, London.

A newspaper article by K.P.S. Kumaran in *Prabhatham* in 1935, ‘Are not labourers human beings?’ said that the government was aligning with the capitalists because they are paying income tax to the government. A police inspector told the strikers of the Malabar Soiling and Weaving Company that the company was paying money to the government and therefore the police would be looking into the company’s interests. The only option left for the workers was to wake up and unite.

Therefore, wake up and unite for the preservation of humanity, to establish your freedom, to protect your self-respect, and above all, to appease the hunger of your children.<sup>63</sup>

Sardar Chandroth, another socialist, wrote in *Prabhatham*:

The majority class must make organised efforts to put an end for all time to poverty, ignorance, inequality, injustice, high-handedness and exploitation going on in the world.<sup>64</sup>

Organised agitations among the workers in factories in north and south Malabar increased from August 1937. Releasing the Congress Socialists from jail had given a fillip to this agitation.<sup>65</sup> The Government of Madras noted in September 1937 that the socialists in Malabar were very active in organising unions among “all sorts and conditions of workers, barbers, boatmen, motor employees and municipal scavengers.”<sup>66</sup> The scavenging workers had submitted a representation with specific

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63 Kumaran K.P.S., ‘Are Not Labourers Human Beings?’, *Prabhatham*, 18 February 1935, Regional Archives Kozhikode (Madras Records, Public Department, 1A(24)).

64 Sardar Chandroth, *Prabhatham*, 11 March 1935, KRA (Madras Records, Public Department, 1A(24)).

65 Fortnightly Report for the Second half of August. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

66 Fortnightly Reports for first half of September 1937, Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

demands to the Commissioner, and it was noted that in this and other recent cases, the workers' demands "appear to have been framed by professional agitators."<sup>67</sup>

#### **5.4 Early Worker Strikes: Feroke 1935-1937**

Small-scale workers' collectives and strikes based on immediate demands started in Malabar as early as the 1930s.<sup>68</sup> However, the organised efforts of the Congress Socialists created an atmosphere of broader class-based solidarities and consistent and radical working class struggles. From 1935 numerous strikes were organised by the industrial working class across Malabar. The socialist leaders within Congress took on the organising responsibilities and planned and systematically improved the mass base of the working-class struggles. The factory owners tried to disrupt the trade union activities with the help of the police and goons. Caste and religious identities and mobilisations were used on many instances to suppress and disrupt the union activities. Violence was used against the workers, and it dampened the workers' movement. Nevertheless, the systematic efforts on the part of the leadership overcame such contexts.

Feroke, a place near Calicut, was one of the centres of industrial strikes since 1935 in Malabar. There were six tile factories in this locality. Commonwealth Tile Factory and Standard Tile Factory, where the workers were first to register their trade unions in Malabar were two prominent factory sites. There were also a good number

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67 Fortnightly Reports for first half of September 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197 British Library, London.

68 There was a handloom workers' union at Azheekkod since 1931. The Devadar Malabar Reconstruction Trust had organised workers from various unions during the same period. A workers' strike occurred at Commonwealth Companies' factories in Calicut and Kannur. A. K. Gopalan, *Ente Jeevithakadha* (Thiruvananthapuram, 2015), 70.

of textile factories in this area.<sup>69</sup> The textile factory at Thiruvannur was under the same management as the Commonwealth.

All these factories employed almost 3000 workers.<sup>70</sup> Most of the workers in the textile factories were contract labourers recruited through agents. Most of the time, these contractors were from landowning families. These contractors paid the wages at various rates, and whenever there was any opposition, it was also easy for the management to deal with the workers through these agents/contractors. There used to be favourites of these contractors among the workers, who got better wages than others.<sup>71</sup>

The workers' strikes erupted in Feroke as tensions emerged over implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Labour in India (1929-1931). J. H. Whitley, who headed the commission, recommended reducing working time from 60 hours to 54 hours a week. Based on his report, the government had passed the Factory Act of 1934 and decided to implement the recommendations from January 1935. Factory owners throughout Malabar, as elsewhere, were trying various ways to evade this rule. Commonwealth Tile Company forced workers to work 10 hours a day for five days, and for the remaining 2 days, they did not pay the workers. Some other factories in the locality also followed the same method, while one company arranged for workers to work nine hours six days a week.<sup>72</sup> The factory owners subverted the

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69 Dutton Saw Mills, South Indian Saw Mill, Premier Saw Mill, Thiruvannur Cotten Mill, etc., were some of the textile factories in Feroke.

70 Ramachandran Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, 466.

71 Fortnightly Reports for the first half of October 1940. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/203, British Library, London.

72 Ramachandran Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, 466.

Act that was intended to be beneficial for the workers so that they could exploit them further.

KPCC had already formed a committee to organise workers in Malabar in December 1934. P. Krishna Pilla was the convener and K.P. Gopalan and Chandroth Kunhiraman Nayar were the members of the committee.<sup>73</sup> Tile Workers Union started organising political meetings with important political leaders such as K. Kelappan, P. Krishna Pilla A.K. Gopalan, and P.K. Gopalan in the first week of January 1935.<sup>74</sup> Those meetings passed resolutions to implement nine hours work for six days in a week. The manager of the Feroke Tile Company responded to the workers demand by saying that he wouldn't agree to these demands if the unions represented the issue. He wanted the workers to individually represent their issues. Workers submitted individual petitions, yet demands were not met. A.K. Gopalan., who was the secretary of the Tile Workers Union at Calicut, met the manager of Feroke Tile Company. The manager said that he was okay with their demand and requested one week to consult with other tile companies. Immediately after this meeting, six workers of the company were dismissed. Twelve workers from the Standard Tile Works and 30 workers from the Malabar Tile Company were also dismissed in the same week. Then, the workers decided to strike on January 19, 1935.

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73 K. N. Ganesh, C. P. Abubakar, V Karthikeyan Nayar, C Balan, E Rajan, and Puthalath Dineshan, eds, *Keralathile Communist Partiyude Charithram* (Thiruvananthapuram, 2018), 1:247.

74 A meeting of the tile workers of Feroke presided by K. Kelappan was held on January 4, 1935. Another meeting of the cotton mill workers presided by P. Krishna Pilla was held on January 11, 1935. See, Chinthavila Murali, *Sakhavu P Krishnapilla* (Thiruvananthapuram, 2017), 290.

The workers' union organised many meetings, protest marches and solidarity gatherings in and around Feroke from January 16 to February 22, 1935.<sup>75</sup> The workers' unrest erupted in the Malabar Spinning and Weaving Mill since February 9, due to the dismissal of Manari Appu, a handloom factory worker, for delivering a speech at a trade union gathering. Then the strikes got stronger, and broader solidarities emerged. By February, 1935, a significant number of factories in Feroke had agreed to the nine-hour-for-six-day schedule.<sup>76</sup> Then all the managements were forced to agree to the demand of the workers. Factory management agreed to the workers' demands for the nine-hour, six-day workday in a meeting with the trade union leaders on February 22, 1935. It was also decided that the management would reinstate the dismissed workers.<sup>77</sup> Then the workers withdrew their strike.

Though the workers called off their strike on February 22, 1935 it did not end there. Within 10 days, a more intense strike by the workers started in Feroke tile factories. Five important tile factories did not implement the decision about the working hours. Furthermore, they dismissed around 25 workers from their jobs because they joined the trade unions.<sup>78</sup> Workers called for a strike on March 4, 1935. In fact, the workers' strikes since then could be seen as the second phase of the

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75 On January 16, the workers of Feroke and Thiruvannur held a meeting at Chevannur, where Krishna Pilla attended. From January 27 to February 6, 1935, K. P. Gopalan started his 10-day sathyagraha before the Malabar Tile Works. On January 31, a workers' meeting in and around Cheruvannur was held, and around 4000 workers and their families attended. The workers had carried out the call for protest demonstrations by the All India Trade Union from February 4 to 10, 1935, against the new reforms by the British government in various localities of Feroke. Kallayi sawmill workers declared a strike at Dutt and Company in a meeting on February 6, 1935, at Kallayi. This strike was withdrawn after the management agreed to their demands. See, Murali, *Sakhavu P Krishnapilla*, 292–97.

76 Gopalan, *Ente Jeevithakadha*, 75.

77 Murali, *Sakhavu P Krishnapilla*, 299.

78 'Strike at Feroke', newspaper article by Krishna Pilla in *Mathrubhumi* on May 17, 1935. Quoted in, Murali, *Sakhavu P Krishnapilla*, 302.

working-class struggles. The strike started on March 4, 1935, and continued until the middle of April. By then, the strike fizzled out, and workers who were disappointed with the indifferent attitude of the management returned to factories without achieving any demands.

Since the beginning, the factory owners had vehemently opposed union activities and the workers joining the unions. The managements of the factories employed various measures to disrupt and demoralise the strikes. They directed the owners of the nearby places and the buildings not to provide the space for the striking workers to demonstrate. They also approached the government. Accordingly, on March 2, 1935 sub-magistrates of Calicut and Thirurangadi issued orders which prohibited workers' protests in and around the factory premises. Notices were served to the leaders of the trade unions.<sup>79</sup>

Public meetings organised in the nearby towns by the workers such as Ramanattukara and Mannur, to gather support and solidarity for the strike meetings were disrupted by the company agents, management and contractors. They threw stones at the crowd in both places, and a few were injured. Police present at these venues did not intervene to stop the disturbances. Managements threatened the workers with dismissal.

Caste differences were used to disrupt the meetings. On April 7, 1935 a public meeting was planned on the grounds in front of the Cheruvannur temple at 8 am. This was the same ground used by the workers since January. Important leaders of the Congress such as, K. Kelappan, A. K. Gopalan, K Damodaran, and K. A. Keralayeen,

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79 One of the trade union leaders of that strike, N. C Shekar, later in his autobiography, recalled that twelve of them received the prohibitive orders banning them from mobilising, organising or attending any activities in and around the factory premises. N. C. Sekhar, *Agniveedhikal* (Kottayam, 2018), 188.

were present at the meeting. When Kelappan started his speech, the temple priest approached him and asked him to call off the meeting since the presence of the lower caste people would pollute the temple. When Kelappan asked him to approach the authority and insisted on the continuation of the meeting, the company agents and rowdies who were present in the crowd started shouting at him, saying that he was misleading the crowd. They accused him of being responsible for the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. They surrounded Kelappan and threatened him that he wouldn't leave the place alive. Seeing this, K Damodaran requested the police to intervene, but the circle inspector said that there was no criminal offence and they couldn't intervene. Kelappan had to call off the meeting.<sup>80</sup>

A. K. Gopalan recollected another incident which occurred during this strike. This incident shows the use of religious sentiments to disrupt the meeting.

There was a big public meeting at Cheruvannur. While K. Damodaran was addressing the crowd, Janab Imbichi Mammad, one of the rich men of the region, came along with some Muslims. He had brought them from Eranad to disrupt the meeting. An old Muslim priest, *mulla*, was among them, and he wanted to speak for the Company owners. We let him speak. While speaking, somebody threw a stone that fell near him. One of the goons from the crowd shouted that it was me who attacked *mulla*. I was sitting next to *mulla*, and everybody knew that it was not me. But the goons wanted to attack me. My comrades moved me from there to safety. The reserve police also reached the place. They were searching for me. Goons destroyed the union's office, and they assaulted Keraleeyan. Imbichi Mammad declared a 1000 rupee bounty for my head and assured all the legal protection. I was charged with assaulting a Muslim.<sup>81</sup>

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80 Ramachandran Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, 467.

81 Gopalan, *Ente Jeevithakadha*, 79. Translation mine.

In all these protests, there was continued violence intending to discredit the union and destroy the worker's strike from the side of the management. Police were standing unconcerned all the time. This strike, which continued for almost two months, was unsuccessful in achieving its demands.

On November 11, 1935, another strike started at the Thiruvannur Spinning Mill. The management's attempt not to honour the earlier agreements was the reason for the strike. The demands concerned recognition of the labour union, wage increase, termination of contract employment, stopping the atrocities against the workers, etc. On November 13, management issued a notice that the workers who participated in the strike would be dismissed. Then, a workers' indefinite strike was declared. Company management and the government used the same tactics as during the March-April, 1935 workers' strike. A meeting was disturbed by the priest of the Cheruvannur temple on November 16. Goons were deployed at various workers' meetings.<sup>82</sup>

The government and the company owners expected that the spirit of the struggles would fade out with the previous strike. However, the experience of the previous strikes had strengthened the workers; this time, they could organise their struggle contesting the atrocities and tactics of the company owners.<sup>83</sup> The labour union approached the district magistrate and requested him to intervene to find a solution. This strike also exposed the contradictory interests within the Congress. Krishna Pilla resigned from the KPCC executive committee due to the indifferent attitude of the Congress leadership towards the strike. The meeting of KPCC held on January 12, 1936, discussed the issues of Thiruvannur strike and resolved to provide

82 Murali, *Sakhavu P Krishnapilla*, 318.

83 Sekhar, *Agniveedhikal*, 189.

financial assistance to support it. However, it declared neutrality towards the strike since the conciliatory board's action was pending.<sup>84</sup> On January 16, 1936, the management agreed to most of the workers' demands, and then the strike was called off.

The same pattern of larger solidarities and appeal to the government to resolve the issues and strong determination despite the atrocities by the capitalists and the state was visible in the workers' protest of the colonial Malabar. They did not instigate violence. There was another strike in the Commonwealth Tile Factory, which started on September 11, 1937. A worker was dismissed without any reason from the company, and 165 workers out of the total 221 workers went on strike.<sup>85</sup> The strike also continued for almost one month. This time, picketing by the workers and stray cases of assault were reported.<sup>86</sup>

One incident of the violence by the workers against the management was reported in October 1940. A European manager of Feroke Tile Works was assaulted by a fraction of the workers. By then, the collective bargaining by the workers had brought about raises, though small, in the wages of the workers. Then, the intermediary agents and contractors became a liability to the management. These agents or contractors who took money from the management paid wages at varying rates. Hence, the agents appropriated a good amount from the company, and most of the money went into their pockets. In this context, Feroke Tile Works began to engage workers directly at a flat wage rate. Some of the workers, who were the favourites of

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84 *Mathrubhumi*, January 14, 1936, quoted in Murali, *Sakhavu P Krishnapilla*, 321–22.

85 Fortnightly Report for the first half of September 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/ 5/197, British Library, London.

86 Fortnightly Report for the second half of September 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/ 5/197, British Library, London.

the contractors and agents, were also paid a better wage than others who refused to accept the flat rate. The contractors and agents were also instigators behind this. The manager responded that if they did not accept the flat rate, they would be discharged. Then, the workers assaulted the manager. The manager sustained minor injuries. Most of the workers who assaulted joined the work the next day. There was no action taken against them. This incident did not lead to any further clashes.<sup>87</sup>

In this case, the violence was instigated by workers who sided with the contractors and agents who hailed from the landed elite families. This violence was not suppressed or dealt with by any authority, nor were there any other consequences that followed.

### **5.5 Communists and Workers Strikes 1937-1940**

The worker's unrest was common in all parts of India during 1930s, as the governor of Madras mentioned:

We are having a lot of labour trouble all over the presidency, but until now, except at Chirla, the various strikes have been peaceful. In my opinion, V. V. Giri is handling the situation very well, and I do not think that we need to anticipate anything very serious in the near future. But I understand that this labour unrest is common to the whole of India and that being so, it was unlikely that the Madras Presidency would escape being affected by what appears to be a general move.<sup>88</sup>

From 1937, there were massive strikes by workers across Malabar. In the same year, the socialist faction ascended to the leadership position of the Congress, where E.M.S.

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87 Fortnightly Report for the first half of October 1940. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/203, British Library, London.

88 Governor Report No. 4 of 1938, dated March 7, 1938. Public and Judicial Department, Madras Governors Reports. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/198, British Library, London.

Nambutiripad was elected as the president of Kerala Provincial Congress Committee. Congress prioritised efforts to mobilise workers and peasantry. Almost all the factories had trade unions by then, and they began to articulate their demands collectively. The workers' strikes in Malabar were not limited to a few industrial units. The industrial setup in colonial Malabar was multifocal. There were many industrial units in almost all of the semi-urban areas. Hence, almost all of Malabar's urban and semi-urban regions emerged as the spatial localities of working-class protests. In these protests, the socialist/communist leadership was visible. While communist groups primarily focused on the big industrial centres in other parts of India,<sup>89</sup> their leadership was visible in almost all the working-class struggles in Malabar in the small industries. The local labour unions were integrated into the broader working-class movements. Local demands were articulated in the generalised protest method and a universal political language through the presence of a centralised leadership for the strikes. A survey of the various protests and strikes during this period will demonstrate this.

West Coast Electrical Supply Corporation at Kannur was a company in charge of the new electrical supply in North Malabar. The workers of this company went on strike on June 30, 1937, demanding increase in wages. It was a period when the company was busy with their work in north Malabar. Hence, management attempted to bring extra men from Thalassery and other neighbouring places. This was resisted and thwarted by the local socialists. There was no confrontation, but it "was a peaceful deposition on the part of these stickers."<sup>90</sup> This strike lasted for almost a

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89 Sarkar, 'Labour History in India and South Africa', 192.

90 Fortnightly Report for the first half of July 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

month. On July 27, workers agreed to an unconditional return to work, but on an understanding that the wage question would be settled by arbitration.<sup>91</sup>

On July 2, 1937, the workers of Thalassery weaving factory went on strike against the dismissal of one of the workers from the factory. The manager of the company had accused this worker of stealing yarn. During the strike, C. H. Kanaran, the local socialist leader, intimidated the owner of the factory. Kanaran was arrested and prosecuted.<sup>92</sup> Around 170 workers went on strike for 21 days. They had to end their strike unconditionally on July 23.<sup>93</sup> The owner of this factory was said to be making very little profit, and it was said that he was of a benevolent disposition. So there was nothing for him to be afraid of.<sup>94</sup>

Another strike was organised by the workers of the Sree Krishna Weaving Company's Anjarakandi Branch. The company had previously terminated half of their 60 employees. The management said that there was lack of work. The rest of the workers declared a strike in August 1937. They demanded an increase in their wages and also the reinstating of the dismissed workers. This strike was compromised not achieving any of their demands.<sup>95</sup> In the same manner, another strike at the Solar Dyeing Factory at Pallikkunnu in Kannur was also called off. In fact, this was a small factory with only 20 workers. After the strike, the working hours were reduced, and a

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91 Fortnightly Report for the second half of July 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

92 Fortnightly Report for First half of July 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

93 Fortnightly Report for the second half of July 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

94 Fortnightly Report for first half of July 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

95 Fortnightly Report first half of August 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

certain number of paid holidays were given to workers. It was also promised that they would be given prompt wages.<sup>96</sup>

In the second half of September 1937, workers at the Vishnu Weaving Factory, Chovva Kannur, went on a strike. There were a total of 175 workers, and 160 workers participated in the work for two days. On the second day, workers ended the strike because management had agreed to their demands.<sup>97</sup> In the same month, workers of the Colombia Umbrella Works also struck. This strike ended on September 13 without achieving any of their demands. All the workers rejoined their jobs, except for one worker the management refused to take back.<sup>98</sup>

The scavengers of Thalassery municipality submitted a set of demands to the municipal commissioner in the second half of September 1937 and declared a strike if their demands were not met. The negotiation was successful, and they did not go for any strike.<sup>99</sup>

Another strike started at the Commonwealth Trust factory at Puthiyara beginning in October 1937. The workers and the leaders organised a satyagraha in front of the factory gate, not allowing people to pass. Police intervened, and the striking workers were removed from the gate by the police. V.V Giri, minister of labour in the government of Madras, met with the management during his visit to Malabar. Though nothing substantial was achieved in this meeting, more than half of

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96 Fortnightly Report for the second half of August 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

97 Fortnightly Reports for the second half of September 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

98 Fortnightly Report for second half of September 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

99 Fortnightly Report for second half of September 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

the original strikers joined back to work on October 11, 1937. The governor of Malabar observed that the

Arrest of Batiawala and the advice to workers given by Honourable Mr V.V. Giri will have a good effect in checking the dissemination of undesirable propaganda among the labouring classes, which had become very noticeable in the district.<sup>100</sup>

On December 18, 1937, a large number of weavers from various factories in Kannur started their strike. Their demand was an increase in the rate for a piece of work. Workers expected a raise since it was Christmas time and there was huge demand and orders pending. They expected that the employers would accept their demand. The weavers, before declaring the strike, had given 32 hours to consider their demands. But the employers wanted more time.<sup>101</sup> But all the employers, except one establishment, refused their demands. This strike continued for a month. In January 1938, strikers started picketing, and there were many instances of conflict. Even the Congress leadership split on this protest, where the moderate Congress members supported the employers in opposition to the Congress socialists who supported the strikes.<sup>102</sup> This strike ended in the second half of January.<sup>103</sup>

On December 27, 1940, a general strike was organised at Calicut. After this general strike, labour agitations intensified in the city. Picketing was the most adopted method of the protest. There was a brutal suppression of the workers' movement in

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100 Fortnightly Report for the first half of October 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/197, British Library, London.

101 Fortnightly Report for the second half of 1937. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/198, British Library, London.

102 Fortnightly Report for the first half of January 1938. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/198, British Library, London.

103 Fortnightly Report for the second half of January 1938, Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/5/198, British Library, London.

the 1940s. In response, workers denounced the police and the government.<sup>104</sup> Protesters blocked roads. The administration had declared prohibitory orders. Yet workers conducted meetings and processions. But the police used extreme violence on workers. On January 3, 1940, police *lathi*-charged two meetings of the workers, and several were injured.<sup>105</sup> Trade union leaders like V.K Kunhiraman and M. K Kelu were imprisoned for a year for their speeches.<sup>106</sup> Factory owners could reopen their factories in the repressive context. For instance, Premier Hosiery Work at Calicut was reopened on January 8, with 60 per cent of actual workers rejoining work. The union tried to continue the strike by picketing. But the secretary of the union and seventeen others were arrested for picketing.<sup>107</sup> Then the nominal strike continued for another 30 days but without picketing.<sup>108</sup>

After the general strike, there were not many strikes until April, 1940. In April, again, a small protest erupted. On April 21, 1940, a small labour conference passed a resolution threatening a strike if 25 per cent of the dearness allowance was not granted in two weeks.<sup>109</sup> At Kannur, handloom weavers started a strike demanding a wage hike. This also had little effect as all factories were reopened within a week of the

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104 Fortnightly Report for the first half of January 1940. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/202, British Library, London.

105 The official account was that eight people were wounded. Fortnightly Report for the first half of January 1940. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/202, British Library, London.

106 Fortnightly Report for the first half of January 1940. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/202, British Library, London.

107 Fortnightly Report for the first half of January 1940. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/202, British Library, London.

108 Fortnightly Report for the second half of January 1940. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/202, British Library, London.

109 Fortnightly Report for the second half of April 1940. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/202, British Library, London.

start of the strike. 22 factory owners decided against the increase the wages. This strike continued for another month with picketing being the mode of protest.<sup>110</sup>

The above survey shows that a protest culture emerged among the working class of Malabar by the end of the third decade of the twentieth century. They were united on class lines and the state, along with the capitalists emerged as their main opponent. Their struggles and protests were focused against them, inevitably linking these protests with the national movement. At the same time, they had a more realistic understanding of their demands. They did not continue the struggle romantically until their demands were met. The working class strikes effectively utilised methods of negotiation and compromise. The police and the company management instigated violence. However, the working class never perceived violence as an effective strike strategy. A close look at the beedi industries in Malabar will bring out the microdynamics of the working-class protests during this period.

Beedi rolling, which started as a traditional occupation alongside agriculture in the 1920s, spiked at the beginning of 1930 and converted into a factory set-up.<sup>111</sup> Since the 1930s, beedi industry began to emerge in almost every part of Malabar. Employment in the beedi factories, as in any other industry, was a way out of the exploitative and socially repressive rural system. There was an increase in tobacco consumption in the Madras Presidency since the 1920s. The 1931 census report stated that the “tobacco figures have doubled, an indication of the growth of the smoking

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110 Fortnightly Report for the second half of April 1940, Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/202, British Library, London.

111 Suramya Thekke Kalathil and Santhosh Abraham, ‘Regulation and Resistance: Defactorisation in the Beedi Industry of Colonial Malabar, 1937–1941’, *Labor History* 61, nos 5–6 (2020): 660–61.

habit, which is a matter of ordinary observation.”<sup>112</sup> The same report said: “South Canara seems more addicted to sweetmeats than other districts. Malabar seems more addicted to smoking if the proportion of tobacco dealers in any guide”, which indicates the presence of a big domestic market.<sup>113</sup> The political movements since the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movements called for boycotting foreign goods, leading to the replacement of foreign cigars with local beedis. The low price of beedi was also a reason for the increase in tobacco consumption, almost doubling its figures from the previous decade.<sup>114</sup> The high demand for quality beedis and the competition among employers to ensure maximum quality also led to competition for the most skilled workers, leading to better wages. Skilled workers used to get a lump-sum advance at the time of recruitment.<sup>115</sup>

The depression of the 1930s disrupted the labour conditions in beedi companies. The fall of the rural economy, which had flourished on the cash crop market in the previous decade, created rural unemployment, and the agricultural labourers moved to urban centres in search of employment.<sup>116</sup> The wages in the beedi companies dropped, and the system of advance payment stopped. Different wage scales emerged within the same company establishment.

The beedi companies did not fit into any definition of a factory. There was no machinery used, and almost no company had electrical power. That was one reason

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112 M. W. M. Yeatts, *Census of India, 1931*, Volume XIV, Madras, Part 1 (Madras, 1932), 196.

113 Yeatts, *Census of India, 1931*, 202.

114 Yeatts, *Census of India, 1931*, 196.

115 Richard W. Franke, Pyralal Raghavan, and T. M. Thomas Isaac, *Democracy at Work in an Indian Industrial Cooperative: The Story of Kerala Dinesh Beedi* (Ithaca and London, 1998), 25.

116 Franke et al., *Democracy at Work in an Indian Industrial Cooperative*, 25.

why the beedi companies were exempted from the purview of the Factories Act.<sup>117</sup> Beedi companies, ‘a godown or a shed’, had almost 150-200 workers, whereas the smaller establishment had 30-50. Children were also employed in the factories for lesser or no wages.<sup>118</sup> By the end of 1937, the wages of the Beedi workers at Northern Malabar were diminished to 5 to 5.5 *annas* per thousand beedis. At the same time, in nearby districts, the wages in towns were seven *annas* and in the rural areas six *annas*.<sup>119</sup>

It was in this changed context that the first association of beedi workers was established in Thalassery in 1934.<sup>120</sup> Majority of workers in the beedi companies were from the Thiyya caste. There were also significant number of Muslims among the workers. The first union established among the beedi workers, *Sree Narayana Beedi Thozhilali Sangham* (the Sree Narayana Beedi Workers Association), was in the name of the great Ezhava social reformer. The formation of a caste based workers union was in the context of Thiyya social reform.

The shift from the caste character of the first trade union to the class character was realised immediately. The workers of the Charka Beedi company in Thalassery had started a strike demanding a wage increase in the last of May 1934. This was a protest against the management’s attempt to reduce the wage. When the strike started, the management employed strike-breakers from South Malabar, especially from Ponnani, Malappuram and Kondotty. They were mostly Muslims. The union, which

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117 Yeatts, *Census of India, 1931*, 203.

118 Yeatts, *Census of India, 1931*, 203.

119 ‘Mr. V. R Nayanar’s Statement’, Indian Express, 22 December 1937, Regional Archives Kozhikode (Madras Records, Development Department, 26(19)).

120 Patrick Heller, *The Labor of Development: Workers and the Transformation of Capitalism in Kerala, India* (Ithaca, New York, 1999), 181.

was not experienced in facing this challenge, had to end the strike without achieving any demand. The failure of this protest initiated the discussion within the union, and the Congress nationalists like Sardar Chandroth Kunjiraman Nayar and P Madhavan moderated this discussion. It was also the time in which the Muslim-Thiyya conflicts were at their peak concerning the temple processions and music in front of the mosques. It was noted that the caste attributes of the *Sree Narayana Beedi Thozhilali Sangham* had kept the Muslims, which was the second largest working force in the industry, out of the union. Hence, in the same year, *Sree Narayana Beedi Thozhilali Sangham* was renamed *Kerala Beedi Thozhilali Sangham* (All Kerala Beedi Workers Association). Sardar Chandroth, elected as the union's vice president, wrote, "All workers, whatever be their caste or religion, are basically workers. All workers have the same work, same wages and same working time."<sup>121</sup> This was how the workers came together, disregarding their caste and religious affiliations.

The coming of Congress to power in 1937 had created greater enthusiasm among the workers. The beedi workers organised various strikes across Malabar since 1937. In 1937 the factory inspector to the Government of Madras was due to visit the beedi establishments of Malabar. Since various complaints arose about not including the beedi companies in the purview of the Factories Act, it was decided to include those companies under the Factories Act to provide considerable protection for the workers. Realising this, management started a 'defactorisation' of the beedi industries.<sup>122</sup> The census report of 1931 already noted that the extension of the Factory Act to beedi companies could be defeated by keeping the number of workers less than

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121 Chandroth Kunjiraman Nayar in *Mathrubhumi* August 12, 1934, as quoted in Franke et al., *Democracy at Work in an Indian Industrial Cooperative*, 33.

122 Thekke Kalathil and Abraham, 'Regulation and Resistance'.

ten as “a tendency towards smaller units seems already apparent.”<sup>123</sup> Factory inspection was aimed at dealing with this situation. To evade this, management started reducing the strength of companies below ten by sending workers home. Workers started their strikes and petitioned the governments.<sup>124</sup>

The New Darbar Beedi Factory workers went on strike on November 20, 1937, protesting the wage cut. The secretary of the *Beedi Thozhilali Union* at Thalassery wrote a letter to the factory inspector on November 30 asking him to visit this factory, although it was closed due to the workers’ protest.<sup>125</sup> The S. V. Bhatt Beedi Factory workers at Thalassery were asked on November 29, 1937, not to appear for work for the coming days. Management promised them the supply of articles for manufacturing at home. Then, workers initiated their protest.<sup>126</sup>

By December 8, 1937, Beedi workers different companies in Kannur started a collective strike against various issues. More than 1000 beedi workers were on strike. Some of the factories settled with the striking workers. For instance, the strike at the New Darbar Beedi Factory was negotiated at this time, and workers joined the factory back.<sup>127</sup> The factory owners were adamant about their stand, and this strike continued

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123 Yeatts, *Census of India, 1931*, 203.

124 Order Memo No. 5708-IV/37-1, dated December 9, 1937, Madras Records, Law Department, Bundle Number 26, Serial number 19, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

125 Letter. C. H Kanaran and others to the Labour Inspector to the Government of Madras, dated November 30, 1937, Madras Records, Development Department, Bundle Number 26, Serial Number 19, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

126 Letter. C. H Kanaran and others to the Labour Inspector to the Government of Madras, dated November 30, 1937, Madras Records, Development Department, Bundle Number 26, Sl. No. 19, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

127 ‘Beedi Workers’ Strike Continues’, Indian Express, 19 December 1937, Regional Archives Kozhikode (Madras Records, Development Department, 26(19)).

for almost a month, affecting four big beedi companies, three to four medium factories, and 100 establishments with less than five workers.<sup>128</sup>

All of these strikes continued for almost a month. By the first week of January 1938, as the district magistrate of Malabar noted, all the beedi workers resumed their work. The workers agreed to accept the old rate of wage until the end of that month, and from February, an increase of 6 paise per thousand beedi was accepted. It was also resolved to have the supervision of the employers in the factory<sup>129</sup>. Though the struggle lasted over a month and the material condition of the workers was terrible, these protests did not turn violent at any time during this period. The socialist leaders of the Malabar led these strikes. As the Governor of Madras noted, “The direction of the strike is in the hands of the local socialist leaders.”<sup>130</sup>

Workers of Abdulla Beedi Company struck work at Ponnani in November 1939. The reason for the strike was the reduction in their wage by the factory owner. It was during the *ramzan* time, and most workers were Muslims. Almost 110 workers were arrested during the protest. The trade union leaders requested that the district collector of Malabar intervene in the issue. Then, in a meeting with the district authorities, the management agreed to accept the workers’ demands. But they did not reinstate the wages. Then, the workers organised an intense struggle. K. Damodaran, C. Kannan and K. Raghavan were convicted of one year imprisonment. The news of

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128 Chatta Beedi Factory with 130 strength, Krishna Beedi Factory with 150 workers, C.H. Ramunni’s Beedi Factory with 54 and K Anandan’s factory with 28 workers were the important factories affected. Report. District Magistrate, Malabar, to the secretary of the Government, Development Department, Madras, dated January 7, 1938. Madras Records, Development Department, Bundle Number 26, Serial Number 19, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

129 Madras Records, Development Department. Bundle Number 26, Serial Number 19, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

130 Fortnightly Report for the first half of December 1937, Indian Office Records, IOR/L/PJ/5/197, British Library, London.

the arrest of the leaders spread over the region, and the masses, including women and children, protested in front of the police station. They raised the slogans: ‘Inquilab Zindabd/ Allaho Akbar.’<sup>131</sup> This protest manifested the intersections of class and religion that was politically acknowledged. During the same time, many songs became popular. One of the songs said that the Prophet Muhammad had suggested that wages be given before the sweat of the worker dries.<sup>132</sup> Religious doctrine was intertwined with class identity, and a new political consciousness emerged. In Malabar, religious doctrines developed into an emancipatory political potential. Working-class politics legitimised with the religious sanction. This development in working-class consciousness, manifested in the strike of beedi workers of Ponnani, was significantly different from what Chakrabarty argued in the case of jute-mill workers of twentieth century Bengal, where he said that jute-mill workers had “never been politically emancipated from religion.”<sup>133</sup>

### **5.6 Workers and Strikes in the Late Colonial Era: Aron Mill Strikes**

Aaron Spinning and Weaving Mill was established by Samuel Aaron, an important industrialist in Malabar and a prominent member of Congress. He established this mill in 1937. He started an industrial training centre at Kulappuram and acquired huge land to establish factories. He also acquired the first registered company in Malabar, the Commonwealth Trust, which was established by the Basel Mission.<sup>134</sup> This mill

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131 Ganesh et al., *Keralathile communist partiyude Charithram*, 1:253.

132 This song was written by the famous songwriter of Malabar, V. V. K Bava. See, Ganesh et al., *Keralathile communist partiyude Charithram*, 1:253.

133 Rethinking working class history, p. 217.

134 A A Anthony and Mary T. Joseph, ‘Kannur: History, Background and Trade Linkages’, in *SMEs in Indian Textiles: The Impact of Globalization in a Developing Market*, ed. A A Anthony and Mary T. Joseph (London, 2014), 49, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137444578\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137444578_6).

was the largest cotton mill in the Malabar region. He was a Congress leader who worked as president for the Malabar Congress Committee when most of the leaders were imprisoned and took the responsibility to revive the strength of the Congress.

Aaron Spinner's and Weaving Mill was a site of the recurring workers' struggle. The workers' strike also happened in the context of a fight between the moderate and socialist fractions within the Malabar Congress. For instance, K Madhavan, a Congress leader who later became a communist, recalled an incident in his autobiography. He attended the Salt Satyagraha as a fifteen-year-old boy, and he was imprisoned. Later, Krishna Pilla, a leader of the Congress Socialists told him that there were two groups in the Congress, one working for the poor and the other working for the rich. Krishna Pilla wanted him to join the socialist group of the Congress. When Krishna Pilla said this, he couldn't understand it because such a division was not visible to him. But later, after a few years, when he heard the news about the Aaron Mill strike and K. P Gopalan, a young Congress member who was leading a strike, he understood that Krishna Pilla was right about those groups.<sup>135</sup> Hence, The strike at the Aaron Mills also had an ideological dimension.

The first major strike at the Aaron Mill started on April 15, 1940. The dismissal of the workers and retrenchment were the immediate cause of the strike. A comparatively small number of workers joined the strike. Obstructive picketing was the mode of protest. A serious disturbance occurred at the mill on April 24, where there was a physical conflict between the workers and the police. As per the official version, it was reported that the police sub-inspector and six police constables were

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135 K. Madhavan, *Oru Gandhian Communistinte Ormakal* (Thiruvananthapuram, 2016), 111–16.

heavily attacked with stones by a crowd of about 200 workers and local socialists.<sup>136</sup> There was a serious lathi-charge with several injuries. Police could disperse the crowd with the lathi-charge. After the incident, a prohibition order was passed banning the gatherings of people in the locality. It was noted:

Struggle in this mill is largely political as the proprietor is a staunch right-wing congressman. He is a man who, like many of his colleagues, has broken with the socialist group which controls KPCC and even worked against the socialist candidate in recent district board elections. The local newspaper, which loses no opportunity to criticise the present administration, gave substantially the police version of the disturbances.<sup>137</sup>

The strike lasted for more than thirty days. During all this times, the factory functioned normally in the daytime. There were a few instances of intimidation. There was a one-day solidarity strike on May 1 where workers of the Commonwealth Trust Factory, beedi factories, and municipal scavenging workers joined. All these trade unions were under the socialists.<sup>138</sup>

Another important strike at Aaron Spinning Mill, which lasted for more than 100 days, occurred in 1946. Workers' unions in Malabar had decided to observe a one-day sympathetic strike supporting the Naval Mutiny of 1946. Accordingly, the workers' union of Aaron Mill also approached the management and informed them about the strike. However, Samuel Aaron, the managing director, did not approve of the strike. However, a section of the workers, numbering about 500, struck work on

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136 Fortnightly Report from the second half of April 1940. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/202, British Library, London.

137 Fortnightly Report for the second half of April, 1940. Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/202, British Library, London.

138 Fortnightly Report for the first half of May 1940, Indian Office Records, IOR/L/P&J/202, British Library, London.

February 26, 1946. The next day, Aaron demanded an apology from the workers who had struck work if they wanted to continue their jobs at the factory. The workers opined that they were entitled to strikes and thus were unwilling to apologise, and 500 workers were not allowed to work. Then, the workers started their protest on February 28, 1946.<sup>139</sup>

The protests were peaceful from the beginning. Since a major portion of the workers continued to work, the factory functioned as usual. Most of the workers who lost their jobs were communists, and hence, the communist party actively engaged in the strike. The mode of protest was picketing. Every day around 6.45 in the morning, workers around 20-30 would gather at the gate and do a picketing protest, exhorting the other workers not to join work and to support their protests. They sang songs and raised slogans against Mr. Aaron and about the injustice committed against them for protesting against the naval shooting in Bombay. They also raised other demands, such as increase in wages, a three-month bonus, and better treatment from the management. Though the protest continued till late in the evening, on most days after nine in the morning, many protesters would go back, except for four to six leaders.<sup>140</sup> The district magistrate thought the picketing should be permitted within a reasonable limit. As per his order on March 30, the picketing was allowed to continue, and a contingent of armed reserve police was stationed at Pappinissery with a sub-inspector on special duty to maintain law and order.

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139 Proceedings of the sub-divisional magistrate of Thalassery, dated May 30, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

140 Letter. From sub divisional magistrate, Thalassery to the district magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Since the beginning, the company management tried to break the strike using various methods. They submitted multiple petitions against the strike and the union's leaders. It was reported that on March 26, the president of the workers' union of Pappinissery and the leaders of the mill strike, C. Kannan, had announced publicly at a meeting of the striking workers that the head of Mr Samuel Aaron should be cut off and taken in procession in front of the mill gate. Police filed a case, and an interim bond of 500 rupees was taken from C. Kannan.<sup>141</sup> Five other active workers were also accused by the police of intimidating workers who were loyal to the mill management. The charges against these five unionists were identical. They were charged with a total of eight cases. In the first two weeks of April, each of these five workers and others approached the mill workers who were loyal to Aron and asked them not to go to work. When refused, they threatened and assaulted the loyal workers and stole their coconuts.<sup>142</sup> Each of these five striking workers was asked to

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141 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

142 Details of the cases are as follows: K V Narayanan Nambiar called for a petition filed by M.V Kannan of Morazha, that he, along with other strikers, approached Kannan on April 6 with the other the person who was also charged in the other cases with sticks and asked him not to go for the work. When refused, he was threatened that he would see the result in a short time. On April 9, they stole a coconut on his property. On the day of the Vishu festival, they threatened him with a social boycott and bodily injury.

K. V Moosankutty was charged with a case in which he, along with other strikers, asked P.K Krishnan Nambiyar of Morazha not to go to work and, when he agreed, told him that a lesson would be taught to him. On April 9, he and other strikers stole coconuts from his compound. On April 14, he instigated the strikers to assault Nambiyar, and he was assaulted.

The case against K.P.V.R Rayarappan was that he and other strikers asked Ambu Nayar of Morazha not to go to work. When Ambu Nayar refused, Strikers threatened him with the social boycott and other miseries. On April 9, they stole coconut from the petitioner's house. On April 14, he leads a procession threatening words against the Ambu Nayar.

The case against the fourth worker, P.V. Cahthukutti Nambiyar, was that on April 14, he spoke in a meeting of workers that the loyal workers should be physically disabled. On the same day, another meeting was organised near the house of a loyalist worker, where his effigy was burned.

appear before the sub-divisional magistrate and pay 500 rupees as bond.<sup>143</sup> There were also other cases of theft and assault charged against the striking workers by the police which were prosecuted in the courts at Thaliparamba and Kannur.<sup>144</sup> The protesting workers argued that Mr Aron foisted these cases with the help of the sub-inspector of police. The immediate and drastic actions in these cases by the local police and the charges of severe offences resulted in protests against the police as well.

Anti Aaron slogans at the picketing in front of the mill gates came to be mixed up with anti-police slogans... 'down with police repression,' 'police culprits should be punished,' 'those who assault women are vagabonds without mothers or sisters,' 'police should be withdrawn from Pappinissery' etc.<sup>145</sup>

These slogans during the picketing hours, in turn, resulted in developing animosity among the armed police and sub inspector who were posted at the mill gate towards the workers. Police posted at the site wanted to have police action against the strike.<sup>146</sup>

Since May 1946, the picketing strike has begun to intensify. One of the reasons for this was Mr Aaron's attempt to recruit new labourers from distant villages and dismantle many of the handlooms from the factory to set them up in other

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K. V Kunhiraman, the fifth accused, was also charged with public speeches threatening the loyal workers at Thaliparamba. A total of eight cases were charged against these five workers.

143 Case No. 59/46, In the Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Thalassery court, dated May 1, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

144 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

145 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

146 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

locations. The sub-inspector posted at the factory continuously informed the higher authorities that the communists were planning violence. However, such reports by the police on the ground were found baseless and were aimed at desperate police action against workers. The deputy superintendent of police who came along with a full battalion of armed police to the location of the strike on May 7, 1946 after receiving information from the sub inspector that communists were planning violence on that day, observed that the protest was a peaceful demonstration.<sup>147</sup> Twenty protesters at the gate raised slogans and requested the workers not to go to work. As usual, the number of protesters dwindled after 9 am. On the following day as well, the sub-inspector informed the higher officials that the communists were planning to violently block the workers along with the women. Accordingly, on May 9, the sub-divisional magistrate of Thalassery and the deputy superintend of police went to the spot with adequate armed forces. They found around 50 picketers at the gate of whom 12 were women, “but there was no sign of violence.”<sup>148</sup>

The government tried to resolve the conflict from the beginning. The district magistrate and the commissioner of labour of Malabar district met with the workers and the management, but these attempts were unsuccessful. In the meeting with the district collector, workers asserted that it was their right to strike, and management had no legal right to intervene to stop them. Management’s decision to seek an apology was illegal, and the dismissal of 500 workers on this ground led to the strike. Aaron, who attended the meeting, wanted nothing but an apology from the workers.

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147 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

148 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

He said that by participating in the strike, they disturbed the discipline in the company. At this point, the meeting failed.<sup>149</sup>

When the strike went on for 45 days, a delegation of trade union leaders met the minister of labour at Madras. This delegation was led by P. Krishna Pilla, the assistant secretary of the Aaron Mill Workers' Union. The secretary of the Malabar Provincial Trade Union Council was also part of it. By then, the Government of Madras decided to form a conciliation board to resolve the dispute. In this meeting, the trade union leaders informed the minister that many fake cases had been slapped against the workers by the management-police nexus, and that the police issued a prohibitory order against Krishna Pilla for entering Malabar. The minister assured them that the cases and the prohibitory orders would be withdrawn.<sup>150</sup>

The declaration of a conciliation board to look into the workers' demand by the Madras government escalated the situation. It was expected that the Board would favour the workers, and Mr. Aaron did not want any such board. What he hoped for was that the police action would disrupt the strike. Though he engineered plans for the police action with the help of the local police, interventions from the higher police officers and judicial officers prevented any police action. Expecting that the board might ask the workers to be reinstated, Aaron started recruiting new labour from distant villages. He also started dismantling the looms to place them in other factories. So that he could show that he did not require any more labourers. The strikers saw through his tactics, and intensified their struggle. The number of picketers increased,

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149 Ramachandran Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, 487–88.

150 Ramachandran Nair, *The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala*, 491.

more militant songs and slogans were raised, and solidarity marches were organised up and down the mill gate and also in front of Aarons's residence.<sup>151</sup>

The deputy superintendent of police instructed the police stationed at the protest site not to initiate any intervention until there was an actual breach of peace.<sup>152</sup> Aaron, who understood that the workers' protest was not going out of control and that the police action was unlikely, started enlisting rowdies as labourers to intimidate strikers and create a situation whereby the police would be forced to interfere.<sup>153</sup> This created further tensions between the workers and the strike-breakers.

Workers decided to checkmate the crooked motive of the Aaron at any cost. On May 23, 1946, workers came up with another mode of protest. A group of workers, numbering 28, lay down on the road, which was a mile away from the factory gate. This protest, rather than blocking the workers from going in, might be seen as a more symbolic protest since it was undertaken far away from the mill, and the allegation of the obstruction of workers was out of the question. The special duty sub-inspector and the reserve police, who were on patrol, saw the protesters lying on the road and arrested them and produced them before the sub-magistrate of Kannur. They got remanded until May 27. Protesters accused the police of brutality and attributed their actions to oblige Aaron. The sub-divisional magistrate of Thalassery noted:

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151 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

152 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

153 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

There was no assault with rifles and guns. But I think the sub inspector showed rather an unwanted zeal in sending them up for remand...The sub-inspector told me that he did this to prevent a repetition of this sort of nuisance, which would certainly lead to a clash between the loyal workers and the strikers and develop into a breach of peace...I find it an expression of his estranged feelings towards the communists- of course done under the cloak of law and duty- for their agitation and slogans against him and the police in general.<sup>154</sup>

The next morning, workers were more agitated and shifted to the front of the mill gate blocking the workers from entering the factory. The protesters, including women, were lathi-charged and locked up in the police van. Police kept them in the van for some time and released later. A petition submitted to the sub-magistrate of Kannur by 28 protesters who were detained by the police on that day described the events. The protesters had done the lie-down protest in front of the mill gate since 6.45 am. Then, the strike breakers began to arrive, and protesters requested them not to go inside. Then the police arrived, and they started beating K. Kunhambu, who was campaigning using a megaphone.

When we saw K. Kunhambu being beaten, kicked and dragged, we shouted the slogan. Then, some constables rushed to us. We sat there when we saw them coming. The police caught off the hair of the females, dragged them, hit them with the butt of the rifles and *lathis* and fisted them on the head, back and front and kicked them with the shoes. After tying K. Kunhambu's hand and legs with rope, we were dragged and taken to the van.<sup>155</sup>

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154 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

155 Complaint petition in the court of the stationary Sub Magistrate, Kannur. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19, Regional Archives Kozhikode.

One of the strikers was a pregnant woman. Almost 22 strikers out of the 28 who faced police action had injuries like contusions, abrasions and swellings on various parts of the body.<sup>156</sup>

On the following two days, the protest comprised normal picketing. They marched in front of the mill gate. There was an attempt by the deputy superintendent of police and the sub-divisional magistrate to speak with Aaron about fresh recruitment and the dismantling of looms. But he refused to meet the officers.<sup>157</sup> On May 29, 1946, there was a massive gathering of people in solidarity with the striking workers. On that day, workers staged a lie-down protest. The sub-divisional magistrate noted that though the workers lay in front of the gate, the strikers kept a corner empty so the workers if they chose could get inside the factory one by one.<sup>158</sup> This should be considered as an attempt by the workers to avoid conflict. When the rowdies and strike-breakers arrived, there was shouting from the crowd gathered over there. At this moment, strikers also blocked the corner to prevent strike-breakers and rowdies from entering. The situation became tense. As the sub-divisional magistrate noted:

The armed police were smarting to for action with all the pent-up fury against the communists for their slogans against them. On the other side, there was a big crowd standing close by. It was in sympathy with

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156 G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

157 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

158 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

the strikers and was in a defiant mood. The situation was tense and at the climax.<sup>159</sup>

Then, the deputy superintendent of police and sub divisional magistrate spoke to the union leaders and requested to avoid such protests that day. Then the leaders agreed and stopped the protest.

The next day, though, the officials went there to serve a prohibition order. They observed that it was a peaceful protest and found it unnecessary to implement the prohibition. However, the sub-inspector reported that in the morning, the workers had conducted a lie-down protest and had to get up when the rowdies of Aaron went there intending to tremble up. On May 31, 1946, the protest by the workers was peaceful, but the provocation came from the rowdies. Deputy superintendent of police and sub-divisional magistrate identified a non-worker rowdy, shouting and arguing with the protesters. While questioned by the official, he said that Mr. Aaron sent him to do speak against the communists. There was also a complaint by the women strikers that a rowdy had abused them.<sup>160</sup>

The conciliation board started its proceedings on June 10, 1946. From that point onward, workers suspended picketing. The strike ended with a settlement that all the workers who went out of employment from February 26 to June 5 would be reinstated within a month. Samuel Aaron had come with a list of 34 workers who he said had tried to kill him. He said that those workers could not be reinstated. However, the workers declared that none of the workers on the list had ever threatened Mr

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159 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

160 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

Aaron, and the board asked Aaron to reinstate them as well. If there were no vacancies in the handloom mill, they were to be employed in any other factories available in the Pappinissery area, on the ground that they would be re-employed in the same sector once the vacancies arose. Workers' demand for wages for the strike period was dropped. They also agreed that they would not be eligible for any bonus during this period. Furthermore, they were enlisted into an agreement of service afresh.<sup>161</sup>

There were also political dynamics in this struggle. Aaron was a strong right-wing Congress leader who expressed his staunch disagreement against communists. In the previous local body election, he had worked against the communist candidate and ensured he was defeated. So, for communists, who lost in the election mainly because of the interference of the Aaron, this protest was much more than a normal strike.

These important strikes provided an insightful understanding of violence in the working class struggles in twentieth-century Malabar. A close look at the everyday events at the strike made it clear that the workers consciously avoided violence. The management of the company wanted to escalate the tensions into physical conflicts, but on all those occasions, the attitude of the workers to avoid conflicts defused the situation. Aaron and his loyalists sent at least 14 letters to the government from the last of May to the first week of June 1946.<sup>162</sup> All those letters were intended to

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161 G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

162 Letter from Aaron Spinning and Weaving Mills to V. V. Giri, Labour Minister, Government of Madras, dated 25 May 1946; Letter from Aaron Spinning and Weaving Mills to the Labour Minister, Government of Madras, dated 25 May 1946; Letter from citizens of Pappinissery to the Prime Minister, Government of Madras, dated 25 May 1946; Letter from the Muslim Majlis, Pappinissery, to the Prime Minister, Government of Madras, dated 25 May 1946; Letter from the Young Men's Muslim Association to the

discredit the striking workers and their demands. However, none of these letters mentioned any cases of physical violence by the strikers. The militant songs and slogans were called ‘violence’ in those letters. For instance, one letter said:

Thirty or forty people including women and urchins, ... gather daily in front of the Mill gate, should at the top of their voice abusive slogans and sing specially composed vituperative songs, all further aggravated by megaphone harangues exhorting people to violence, None who has experience will argue that this practice can be accommodated within the term ‘peaceful picketing.’<sup>163</sup>

The violence associated with the strike was said to comprise attacks against strike-breakers. A letter written by the loyalist workers of Aaron Mill stated that the communists who were leading the protests attacked their homes, assaulted them, polluted their drinking water and blocked their paths. As already mentioned, there were multiple cases filed against the strikers in the initial stages of the protests for assaulting the loyalist workers. These charges were refuted by the leaders. In fact, the history of the peasant and working-class movements is littered with the evidence of fake cases charged against them in order to suppress the movement. Yet, even if it is

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Prime Minister, Government of Madras, dated 25 May 1946; Letter from Aaron Spinning and Weaving Mills to the Deputy Superintendent of Police (deputy superintend of police), Kannur, dated 27 May 1946; Letter from Aaron Spinning and Weaving Mills to V. V. Giri, Minister of Labour, Government of Madras, dated 27 May 1946; Letter from Aaron Spinning and Weaving Mills to the Sub-Inspector of Police, Pappinissery Camp, dated 29 May 1946; Letter from the Members of the Staff of Aaron Spinning and Weaving Mills Ltd (42 signed) to T. Prakasam, Prime Minister, Government of Madras, dated 29 May 1946; Letter from the Workers (loyal to management) to V. V. Giri, Minister of Labour, Government of Madras, dated 29 May 1946; Letter from Management to the District Collector, Malabar, Calicut, dated 31 May 1946; Letter from Aaron Spinning and Weaving Mills Ltd to V. V. Giri, Minister of Labour, Government of Madras, dated 31 May 1946; Letter from Aaron Spinning and Weaving Mills to the District Magistrate, Malabar, dated 1 June 1946; Letter from Aaron Spinning and Weaving Mills to the District Magistrate, Malabar, dated 7 June 1946.

163 Letter from Management to the District Collector, Malabar, Calicut, dated 31 May 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

assumed that such incidents occurred, they occurred at an interpersonal level. The site of the industrial struggle or protest never witnessed any such events.

Another aspect of this struggle was the attitude of the police towards the industrial struggles in Malabar. When we look into the workers strike at Aaron's mill, it is clear that the police did not act as a tool of the factory owners. They protected the interests of the state. On the individual level, the local police stood with Aaron. In this case, they were always checked by the senior officials from turning that bias into atrocities against the strikers. Whenever such controls did not exist, they used force to terminate the strike in favour of the owner. Yet, in the case of the worker's struggle in Malabar, what Arnold said about the role of police in the peasant struggle wouldn't be correct.

To summarise, the worker's struggle of the twentieth century did not apply the logic of violence to achieve their demands. They were militant. However, as the sub-divisional magistrate rightly observed in the context of the Aaron Mill strike in 1946, "The communists, therefore, intensified their activities and began to do everything short of actual violence."<sup>164</sup> Hence, the militancy practised in the organised workers' movement was not violence, but the vehemence with which they faced challenges and the determination with which they overcame oppression.

### **Overview**

In colonial Malabar, urbanisation and industrialisation followed a different trajectory from other parts of India. There were no large scale industries or big cities, but a working class emerged in geographically scattered small-scale industries and in the

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164 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. G.O. Number. 2074, dated September 30, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, Bundle Number 4, Serial Number 19. Regional Archives Kozhikode.

service sector. Tile, weaving and beedi establishments emerged as important industries.

From the 1930s, factory workers organised under trade unions. From 1935 onwards, they engaged in intense struggles under organised leadership -first provided by Congress Socialists and later by Communists. Workers' struggles soon transcended caste and religious identities and created a new class consciousness.

Workers of Malabar were drawn from the lower castes and Mappila Muslims. Thiyyas, dalits like Cherumas and Mappilas constituted the major workforce in colonial Malabar. These subaltern groups engaged with the political movement by raising worker's demands under trade unions. The workers' movement resolved the earlier forms of caste and religious conflict -and a new sense of community emerged as a result.

Despite the organised use of violence upon them by the state, industrialists, and political opponents in some cases, workers of colonial Malabar never resorted to violence in their protests. A. K Gopalan on September 19, 1938 advised an agitated crowd in Aluva: "The stray acts of violence are not going to achieve anything other than weakening the movement."<sup>165</sup> This was the same consciousness that led to the 1930s and 1940s trade union movements. This is very clear in the Aron Mill strikes, which began in February 1946 and lasted for more than a hundred days. A close examination of events during this strike shows that the company management attempted to provoke violence, while the workers took deliberate steps to prevent the struggle from turning violent.

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165 Gopalan, *Ente Jeevithakadha*, 117.

The lower castes emerged as political subjects using new vocabularies and methods in the peasants' and workers' movements. These movements from the middle of the 1930s showed characteristics of modern social movements and catalysed social transition at least to a limited extent. Pre-modern and early modern social structures and ideologies were getting redefined through the process of contestation unleashed by these movements.

## Conclusion

The larger picture in this thesis is of a society in transition. Colonialism brought fundamental changes to colonised societies. It linked native economies with the global capitalist economy and established modern institutions and ideologies which sought to legitimise the existence of the colonial state. Native societies underwent significant transformations in response to these interventions. The contestation and conflict between various sections of the native society evolved differently during this transition.

Pre-colonial Malabar society was predominantly agrarian, characterised by its unique land relations and cultural practices. The caste hierarchy in pre-colonial Malabar was intrinsically linked to land relations, where it iterated the ritual position of every *jati*, thereby sanctioning the hierarchical principle in the extraction of surplus. When the British established their authority in Malabar, the existing land relations had already been disrupted by the Mysorean invasion, during which the land and authority of Brahmins and upper caste *janmis* were subverted, and the intermediary tenants, *kanakkars*, emerged as new aristocrats. The British not only reinstated the old *janmis* but also granted them the absolute ownership of the land. British land revenue policies further reshaped agrarian relations resulting in contestation at several levels. Colonialism and the emergence of modern institutions opened up opportunities in bureaucracy and electoral bodies. The middle classes who emerged from diverse communities through distinct processes adopted the new vocabularies and attempted to fashion a new, distinctive socio-political project.

Contestation emerged in the caste system in the background of these changes. The first contestation arose between the Nayar middle class and the Brahmins. Early social reform movements in marriage and inheritance practices within the Nayar community, as well as the agitations led by *kanam* tenants, occurred in the backdrop of this conflict. Rather than resorting to direct conflict with the Brahmin *janmis*, Nayars pushed for judicial and legislative reforms through which they ensured state intervention.

This was not the case with the Thiyya caste assertion. A significant Thiyya/Ezhava middle class emerged from the higher strata of that caste, effectively using the new opportunities provided by colonialism. Their attempts to overcome the spatial restrictions that signified their subordination were a contentious process that often led to violent conflicts. Apart from well-orchestrated physical violence, as it was evident in Kalpathy, numerous clashes occurred in the everyday assertion of the Thiyya caste identity. In this contestation, violence manifested in different ways. First, Thiyyas used violence/ counter-violence to oppose upper-caste aggression. Second, the upper castes retaliated against the caste assertion where Thiyyas became the victims of physical violence. Third, in order to establish a higher social status, Thiyyas often used violence against castes lower than them. By the third decade of the twentieth century, assertions by dalit castes also generated new contestations. In these struggles, the higher castes frequently inflicted violence on dalits. However, there were no significant instances of dalits using counter-violence by way of retaliation.

During the colonial rule, the caste hierarchy was constantly reshaped. This study shows that violence was an inherent feature of caste transition, except in the case of contestation between Nayars and Brahmins which reshaped the authority in a

non-violent fashion. Violence operated at multiple layers in all other caste assertion movements. Violence was absent in the Nayar-Brahmin tussle because, by then, the Nayar middle class had achieved a discursive dominance that placed them in an advantageous position with respect to Brahmin aristocrats. In the case of the Thiyyas, though they joined the middle class, they did not possess the discursive tools. The first incident at Kalpathy on November 13, 1924 where Brahmins assaulted Thiyyas, made it clear that their influence over the colonial state was minimal. The state's attitude was reactive, which provoked a much more intensive assertion by Thiyyas. Thiyya elites used violence as a functional device. Counter-violence by Thiyyas was productive in achieving their demands, as the colonial state facilitated an agreement between Thiyyas and the upper castes. The state and the Brahmins recognised a more equal space for Thiyyas.

Dalit caste assertion was paradigmatic in many ways. The contestation by the dalit caste since the middle of the 1930s for social recognition and equality, and against caste oppression was embedded in their struggles as peasants, workers and 'national' political subjects. Equality between different castes and social uplift of the depressed castes were the dominant organising principles of the national movement in Malabar. Such a political context developed a distinctive consciousness and equipped the dalits and other lower sections. The conservative upper-caste Nayars and the Thiyyas unleashed violence to instate the old caste hierarchy. At the local level, upper caste political activists who were part of the national movement supported this violence. However, there were no significant instances of counter-violence by the dalits. Dalit showed militancy by their participation in the peasants' and workers' movement.

Religious identities underwent considerable changes in colonial Malabar. New caste assertions and consolidations contributed to the formation of a ‘Hindu’ community. Since the engagement of Mappilas with the Portuguese, the religious identity of Mappilas had begun to be reshaped. British colonialism and its associated discourses on religious communities significantly influenced the formation of the Mappila community. These community formations of Muslims and Hindus were mutually antagonistic, leading to contestation.

For the upper-caste *janmis*, the Mysorean invasion remained a frightful memory. When they returned to Malabar after the Mysorean rule, many of them saw the Mappilas as collaborators of the Mysorean rulers. Mappila tenants, already vulnerable due to changes in land relations, now also faced religious antagonism. This combination of agrarian and religious tension contributed to the nineteenth-century revolts of the Mappila peasantry. Hindu–Muslim relations further deteriorated after the 1921 Rebellion. Narratives of Mappila atrocities, circulated both by colonial officials and nationalist leaders, deepened the divide. Mappilas came to perceive the Congress and Hindu leadership as traitors who had abandoned them often the onset of colonial repression against them. In the decade following the rebellion, a strong sense of mutual antagonism developed between the two religious communities, and they increasingly felt that peaceful coexistence was impossible. The public sphere became divided along religious lines.

In the 1930s, a new phase of contestation emerged around religious spaces. A series of conflicts then arose over the construction, renovation, or expansion of mosques, particularly in Calicut and Kannur. These contestations did not warrant

communal mobilisations, but the interests of the communities were represented to the government through letters and petitions.

In the second half of the 1930s, musical processions in front of mosques became a more intense source of communal mobilisation. Conflicts occurred during processions associated with festivals in March, 1936 at Karuvalli Kavu in Kannur and at Pinnathu Kavu in Naduvattam, Calicut. In both places, Hindus wanted their processions to pass in front of the mosque with music, while Muslims demanded that the music must be stopped in front of the mosque. These conflicts were extensions of earlier disputes related to mosques. Large numbers of Hindus and Muslims were mobilised at both sites, and Hindu crowds comprised mainly of young Thiyyas drawn from areas where earlier mosque disputes had taken place. Thiyyas, by then, were actively seeking a higher socio-political and economic status. Constitutional developments and the growing influence of legislative institutions opened up new possibilities in the electoral arena. Aspirations emerged among the young Thiyyas for a larger cultural and political affiliation (as Hindus), which led to the militant assertion of the community identity.

However, mobilisations of militant Hindus and Muslims over the religious spaces rarely turned into large-scale communal violence of the kind seen in other parts of India. In Malabar, religious militancy was mainly a way of asserting community identity rather than an attempt to destroy other communities. Another reason for the absence of violence was the strong presence of a public sphere, where the contestations between the communities were brought in and sought resolution through state intervention.

At the level of everyday life, there were many interpersonal conflicts in which solidarities were mobilised along religious lines. The immediate causes of some of these disputes echoed the triggers of the nineteenth-century Mappila discontent. Yet they never developed into movements of that nature. For example, a conflict between a Nayar *janmi* and a Mappila tenant ended in fatal clashes and invoked religious identity. Nevertheless, there was an absence of explicit religious sanction in everyday conflicts. Religion was separated from the everyday conflicts in a limited sense.

By the middle of the 1930s, although religious antagonism had intensified and communal identities had solidified, contestation over religious spaces and practices did not result in violent conflicts. Mosque disputes and the conflicts over musical processions were clearly religious disputes, where class position or antagonism was subdued. Class positions and economic interests were sometimes significant in the interpersonal conflicts. However, religion in an institutional form was kept out of such conflicts. Hence, a direct or visible interlinking of class antagonism or religious identity was absent in the Hindu-Muslim conflicts of the 1930s.

The structure of the caste and the meaning of the communal relationships further changed when lower peasantry and workers organised as new modern political collectivities. Throughout the colonial period, different sections of the peasants were in contention with *janmis* and the state. In the early phase of colonial expansion, Mappila *verumpattam* tenants often contested landlords. From 1900 to 1930, peasant agitation was dominated by the interests of the *kanam* tenants. Through state intervention and legislative enactments, they resolved their demands. By 1934, *verumpattam* tenants and agricultural labourers mobilised under the leadership of the

socialist group within the Congress. Peasant unions were formed across Malabar, and their activities impinged on both *janmis* and the colonial state.

The peasant union activities culturally and politically challenged the existing caste authority. These contestations after the mid-1930s were more organised and oriented than the nineteenth and early twentieth-century peasant movements. In the early phase, roughly between 1935 and 1940, middle-class peasant leaders acted as negotiators between *janmis* and peasants. State intervention was minimal during this period. *Janmis* inflicted violence upon the members of the peasant union by employing goons and overwhelmed them with complaints in the judicial courts.

The formation of the Communist Party (CPI) and the activities of the peasant union under CPI influence invited the intervention of the colonial state and police. The contestation between the peasant union and the colonial state-*janmi* nexus intensified as the state mobilised resources and deployed forces to suppress the peasant movement. The Morazha incident on September 15, 1940 was the only incident cited for fatality due to peasant violence. However, at Morazha, it was an anti-colonial political gathering that brought together different social classes. It would be apt to consider this incident as an isolated event rather than attributing it to the general characteristics of the late colonial period peasant movements. At Karivallur and Kavumbayi, colonial records justify the police shooting, saying that peasants were violent. However, the administrative reports were self-contradictory, and closer scrutiny revealed that the defiance of the peasants did not depend on the use of violence. At Kavumbayi, in all available instances, peasants avoided any violent conflict with the police. At the first sight of police on the early morning of December 30, 1946, peasants retreated to the uphill and opted for a route which they thought

would avoid a confrontation with the police. The peasants counterattacked only after the police cornered them and started firing.

From the 1940s, Communist leaders consistently distinguished themselves from the Congress. They often articulated discarding of the Gandhian non-violence in protests as an important characteristic that distinguished them from the Congress. On the other hand, *janmis* and the state extensively resorted to violence. Despite this overwhelming presence of violence in ideological and material domains the lower peasantry tended to avoid violence in their political actions.

In rural Malabar, the peasant movement undermined the pre-colonial and early colonial caste authority. The contestations in urban localities and the workers' strikes transcended to some extent the pre-modern affiliations of caste and religion. Notably, workers' contestations rarely took the form of violence. This is particularly evident in the Aron Mill strikes, which began in February, 1946 and lasted for over a hundred days. A close examination of events during this strike reveals that the company management attempted to provoke violence, while the workers took deliberate steps to prevent the struggle from escalating into violence.

The peasant movements and working-class movements from the mid-1930s also exhibited the characteristics of social movements that catalysed the social transition. Pre-modern and Early modern social structures and ideologies were redefined through the contestations by these movements.

The social transition from a pre-modern society to a modern society in Malabar was determined by the interplays between different social groups. Contestation and conflict emerged at different stages of this transition. Colonial discourses and practices established violence as a legitimate functional device, in the

process making violence available as a mean of contestation for groups that contested with one another, and also for groups which contested the colonial state. Elites of the native society throughout the colonial period used violence in their fights for authority and social position. However, in the subaltern movements, violence/ counter-violence were only present in the contestation during the early colonial period. At least from 1935, violence was absent in their struggles. Dalit anti-caste movements and peasant and workers struggles in Malabar during this period demonstrate this point. The process by which the subaltern sections became political subjects differed from the way in which the society's elites became political subjects. Elites became political subjects through their everyday interaction with colonialism and its discourses. However, the subaltern sections engaged with modern politics through the medium of anti-colonial, national, and communist political organisations. For them, defiance did not necessarily mean violence. A democratic but militant Malabar society was formed through the distinctive political actions of the subalterns. There is no better way to conclude than to quote what a colonial officer said in the context of a workers' strike in 1946: "[Workers] intensified their activities and began to do everything short of actual violence."<sup>1</sup>

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1 Letter. From Sub Divisional Magistrate, Thalassery to the District Magistrate of Malabar, dated June 9, 1946. Madras Records, Public Department, B. No. 4, Sl. No. 19, RAK.

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## **Indigenous Elites and Social Legislations in Colonial Malabar(1792-1933)**

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### **Abstract:**

This article is looking at the making of three acts on customs and usages of Malabar by the colonial government. These enactments were done in three different phases of the colonial rule. So this will help us in understanding the dynamics of legal development, how the indigenous elites and interests of the state came into play at different points. Indian Slavery Act V of 1843 which was in the phase of early colonialism was a product of debates and discussions that happened in the colonial administrative sphere alone. The Malabar Marriage Act of 1896 was the result of the very first attempt of the indigenous elites and The Malabar Tenancy Act of 1930 was the further extended and developed version of that process. This section will concentrate on the way in which the legislation was brought out, what were the discussions and which spheres these discussions happened.

### **Indigenous Elites and Social Legislations in Colonial Malabar(1792-1933)**

The concept of 'elite' is generally understood as a category of individuals or groups with "disproportionate control or access to resources" (Khan, 2012, p. 362). Social scientists who worked on this concept have argued that the elite class is plural, since there is a decline and degeneration among them, which makes others occupy the elite position. Hence, elites are not a static category; rather, there is a "circulation of elites" in history (Pareto, 1935, p. 359). Bourdieu elaborated on the concept by identifying the various subfields in the 'field of power' (Jodhka & Naudet, 2019, p. 7). Bourdieu also discussed the state's role in legitimising and delegitimising individuals, along with contributing to the sociocultural and economic capital (Wacquant, 1993, p. 39).

Indian elite can be characterised as a social category that held power over Bourdieu's subfields like academic (discourse), bureaucracy, politics and economy. New studies suggest a colonial legal system, at least since the eighteenth century, which is open-ended and plural in accommodating the indigenous understandings, especially in legislation related to culture and social customs (Benton, 2002, p. 6). At this particular juncture, elites in colonial Malabar played a crucial role in the colonial legislation on the social and customary practices. And these

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# Contestation and Conflict: Colonial Malabar in Transition

*by* Irfan Habeeb R T

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