

Review: Mappilas' Religious Militancy

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## Mappilas' Religious Militancy

K N Panikkar

**The Mappilas of Malabar 1498-1922 — Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier** by Stephen Frederic Dale; Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980; pp 290, Rs 180.

IN August 1921 the Mappilas of Malabar rose in revolt, killing the upper caste Hindu landlords and destroying British government offices and judicial courts. It was not the first time the Mappilas had taken up arms; this uprising was only the culmination of a series of revolts during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What were the causes of these sporadic outbursts of violence? Contemporary British administrators sharply differed in their assessment; so do modern historians. The point of debate has been whether these revolts were triggered off by religious fanaticism or agrarian grievances. Posed as a riddle, the answers have emphasised the one or the other. Like many other scholars, Stephen Dale was also initially drawn into 'Mappila history' in order to seek an explanation for the Revolt of 1921, a quest which took him to an examination of the cultural, ideological and political factors in the evolution of the Mappila community (Islamic Society of Kerala to Dale) and in the development of religious militancy during the post-Vasco da Gama epoch.

The central concept of this work is that of 'frontier society' evolved by Paul Wittek in his study of the Ottoman Empire, a concept which was used to explain the militant ideology of the Muslim tribal groups which confronted the Byzantine empire in thirteenth and fourteenth century Anatolia. Viewing the Mappila community as a frontier society, the author has sought to demonstrate how "the struggles for the spice trade, the Mappila outbreaks and the Mappila Rebellion represented to the Muslims themselves, a defence of the Islamic frontiers in Kerala". Yet, it is not intended to be a study based on the primacy of religion as a causal factor; it only seeks to examine the role of religion as an ideology in the series of conflicts that occurred in rural Malabar. The author believes that Mappila attitudes cannot be understood solely as "a response to the spice wars and British rule; it was also fundamentally rooted in the structure

of rural Malayali society — the dominance of economic and social life by the ritually superior, landed Hindu castes". At the same time he also emphasises that a "description of that structural situation by itself constitutes only a passive form of analysis", for "it is critically important to understand how certain groups mobilised to challenge the British-supported Hindu *janmi* class". But a perspective integrating the interdependence and interaction of these factors has not been consistently maintained; instead the emphasis on religious militancy often overshadows the material life situation to such an extent that the analysis almost assumes the all too familiar communal colour. Is this due to the application of the concept of frontier society, a Procrustean bed to which the Mappila community has been mercilessly stretched or compressed? The development of religious militancy and the role of the ulema as well as the religious beliefs and practices have received detailed treatment, but not so the socio-economic context in which the militancy found its expression. Not that the author is insensitive to them; on the contrary, he recognises their importance in no uncertain terms. But then his treatment of these changes is sketchy and of their impact on the rural population inadequate. As a result, instead of being a study of the role of religion as an ideology in the making of the rural conflict and viewing the Mappila outbreaks as arising out "of a complex interaction of social and ideological factors with an important historical dimension", as the author himself has argued elsewhere, it by and large remains a study of men in pursuit of their religious ideals.

Following the lead given by the findings of British officials like T L Strange and William Logan, the beginning of the Mappila revolts has been generally traced to the second quarter of the nineteenth century when a spurt in land prices and in agrarian products occurred in Malabar. The new land revenue policy which recognised the

*janmies* as the absolute proprietors of land as well as the new judicial system helped the maximisation of surplus appropriation by landlords through a series of devices like termination of mortgage lease and eviction and periodic enhancement of rent and renewal fees and innumerable other illegal cesses. William Logan, a British official who had very intimate knowledge of the district, has observed that "the Maplah outrages was an organisation designed to counteract the overwhelming influence, when backed by the British courts, of the *janmies* in the exercise of the novel powers of ouster and of rent-raising conferred upon them". Questioning these views, the author has done well to draw our attention to the existence of rural conflict during the pre-colonial period and raising a discussion on the nature of these conflicts. The heroic tradition generated by some of these conflicts seems to have had an abiding influence on the Mappilas, an influence which was well marked in the outbreaks of the nineteenth century. Whatever the nature of these precolonial tensions, the influence of this historical experience transmitted through an oral tradition in the making of the social and religious perspectives of rural Mappilas, particularly the poor and the illiterate, is strongly suggested. But to locate a continuity in the disturbed and hostile relations between the Mappilas and Hindu landed classes from the pre-colonial to the colonial period is to overlook the crucial difference in the two historical situations. The revolts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were acted out in entirely different scenarios and they cannot be made intelligible without underlining the qualitative changes brought about by colonial rule in rural relations. The failure to give adequate importance to this is a major weakness of this study.

To describe the period of Tipu Sultan's domination over Malabar, Dale has used the term 'Mappila Raj'. He has not spelt out the basis for this characterisation. However, he seems to base his contention on two factors; one, Tipu Sultan's proclaimed intention to convert his Malayali Hindu subjects to Islam, and second, the Mappila tenants seizing the estates of the *janmies* who had fled to Travancore and Cochin in the wake of the Mysorean invasion. To the existing discussion on the religious policy of the Mysore Sultans Dale has

not added any new information or argument to substantiate that Tipu Sultan envisaged "conversion as a solution to the problem of successfully ruling Malabar". He believes that conversions were "substantial enough to persuade large numbers of upper castes to abandon their homes and lands, some never to return". The example cited is that of Parapanangadi Raja whose "house stands deserted to the present day". That several local chieftains and their subordinates fled to Travancore and Cochin is undisputable; however, it is equally true that several others remained in Malabar, accepting the suzerainty of the Sultan. That Tipu's political management was not necessarily based on the social engineering of religious conversion is borne out by his attitude towards Mappila rebels like Athan Moyan Kurikkal, one of Tipu's own revenue officials. When the Kurikkal attacked and destroyed a temple owned by the Raja of Manjeri, Tipu came to the rescue of the latter and the Kurikkal and his son were captured and imprisoned at Seringapatnam. If the Raja of Parapanangadi had to flee due to fear of religious conversion, it is unlikely that the Raja of Manjeri could remain a Hindu and still receive the protection of Tipu from one of the latter's co-religionists. The reason for Hindu chieftains leaving or not leaving Malabar in all probability was political and not religious.

Secondly, the suggestion that the Mappilas generally benefited from the Mysorean rule is equally untenable. When Brahmin landlords left Malabar during the uncertain period of Tipu's invasion, their tenants, not only Mappilas but Hindus as well, received a temporary relief from the payment of rent. This at any rate was not a substantial gain since the rent, at least a major part of it, was absorbed as land revenue imposed by the new government. This point was very strongly made by the Mappila tenants who told the British officials conducting enquiries into revenue matters that in the past they had paid either rent or revenue and never had paid both. If at all any benefit accrued to the Mappilas, it must have been to a small number who were absorbed in the administration. But then the administration was also not exclusively manned by the Muslims; there was a substantial number of Hindus in it. The term 'Mappila Raj' is reminiscent of the now

abandoned characterisation of the medieval period of Indian history as a period of Muslim rule.

These limitations notwithstanding, Dale's approach is refreshingly new and his analysis stimulating. The first three chapters are very well researched and provide interesting insights into the complex history of the Mappilas.

## Technology Factor in Imperial Conquest and Control

Amiya Kumar Bagchi

**The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century** by Daniel R Headrick; Oxford University Press, 1981; pp x + 221, Rs 45.

HEADRICK has written an interesting, readable and informative book. The book concentrates on what might be called the technology factor in the conquest of other peoples by the capitalist nations of Europe in the nineteenth century. He disclaims any ambition to upset old theories of colonialism and imperialism (he treats the two phenomena as synonymous) and thinks he can avoid the necessity of choosing between different theories by separating 'motives' from means: "A model of causality in which the technical means are separate from the motives does not imply that the two are unrelated. On the contrary, the appearance of a new technology can trigger or reinforce a motive by making the desired end possible or acceptably inexpensive. ... If we accept the equal necessity of both motives and means, then the new imperialism could have resulted from any of three possible scenarios: Adequate means were available, but new motives triggered the event; sufficient motives existed, but new means came into play, thus leading to the event; or, finally, both the motives and the means changed, and both caused the event" (p 10).

This tactic works well enough when Headrick describes a single event, or a single sequence of events. The narrative acquires a verve when Headrick describes what havoc the gunboat *Nemesis* caused to the war junta of Imperial China or how it came to be that submarine cables under the control of Britain linked all the oceans and continents of the world. One of the most fascinating chapters in the book deals

The same cannot be said about the second half of the book, particularly the chapter dealing with the Revolt of 1921 which is mainly based on two official accounts compiled by Hitchcock and Tottenham. However, this is the first serious and scholarly work on the history of the Mappilas and is a significant contribution to our knowledge of Kerala history.

with the change quinine prophylaxis brought about in the survival rate of Europeans in tropical and subtropical Africa and the consequent alteration it made in the offensive potential of Europeans against African kingdoms and tribes armed with primitive firearms, assegais and bows and arrows.

However, the single-minded concentration on the technology factor leads Headrick astray when he tries to explain a major historical sequence or a complex phenomenon, such as the late-nineteenth century scramble for Africa. Thus, trying to explain the length of time it took the British to conquer India, the author contends that this was mainly because, as time passed, the technological gap and difference in training between the British and their Indian adversaries narrowed over time because the latter successfully imitated British armaments and methods. He gives the diminishing ratios in the sizes of British and Indian armies from the Anglo-Mysore wars in the late eighteenth century to the Anglo-Sikh wars in the middle of the nineteenth century as evidence for his hypothesis (pp 89-90). This is, however, a mare's nest. Haider Ali and the Marathas defeated the British forces time and again in the first Anglo-Maratha and first Anglo-Mysore wars, and it was only through tenacity and adroit diplomacy that the British held on to their outposts in southern and western India in the 1780s. Again, the opponent Wellesley found it impossible to conquer finally was Jaswantrao Holkar because Jaswantrao successfully carried out guerilla war against his alien enemy. His British opponents referred to