

The Moplah Rising*

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FOREWORD.

[The Moplah rebellion of August and September last, and the more recent incident of the suffocation of a truck load of Moplah prisoners in a travelling "Black Hole of Calcutta," will be fresh in the memory of readers of the REVIEW. Comrade Mukherji's account of the troubles on the Malabar coast brings three points into relief: (1) That the Moplah risings have always been primarily manifestations of the class war; (2) that the attempts (usually well meant) of the British authorities to improve the lot of the poor peasants have invariably resulted under capitalism in strengthening the position of the native capitalist class; (3) that the element of religious fanaticism which has always attended Moplah outbreaks, is receding into the background, and that a solidarity of Mohammedan and Hindu oppressed against their oppressors (Hindu or Mohammedan, European or Asiatic) is coming to the front. This last is what Lord Northcliffe, revisiting India, finds so alarming.

One word more of introduction. It is interesting to read an honest British official's view of these matters. In 1881 Mr. William Logan was appointed to enquire into the Moplah question. In his great work on Malabar, Logan gave a history of the Moplah risings prior to that date, and an account of his mission of enquiry. He sums up the matter as follows ("Malabar," Vol. 1, p. 588, published 1887): "Mr. Logan finally formed the opinion that the Moplah outrages were designed to counteract the overwhelming influence, when backed by the British courts, of the Jenmis [landlords] in the exercise of their novel powers of ouster [eviction] and of rent-raising conferred upon them." The phrase when "backed by the British courts" is peculiarly significant!—E. & C. P.]

ON August, 10th, 1921, a rising began in Malabar, the south-western province of the Madras presidency. According to current reports, numbers of Moplah peasants, incited by the nationalists of the Khilafat movement, had taken up arms against the Government as by law established. Their aim was said to be the overthrow of British rule in India.

It was also asserted that the primary aim of these fanatical Mohammedans was to re-establish the independence of Turkey on its old footing. After the first skirmish, we were informed, the aims of the Khilafat movement had been forgotten, and the mullahs, the bigoted leaders, had directed the attack of the Mohammedan rank and file against their peaceful Hindu neighbours, who were being offered the alternative, "Death or Islam." The result had been the forcible conversion to Mohammedanism of the members of some

*Translated from *Die Internationale*, Dec. 15, 1921, by Eden and Cedar Paul.

eighty Hindu families, and the slaughter of a few dozen more who had preferred death to disgrace and the loss of their religion.

In addition, we were told that the Moplah masses were well armed, not only with staves and with war-knives and swords improvised out of saws in the village smithies, but also with fire-arms secured by raids on the police stations and upon the arsenal of the military depôt of Malupuram, in the centre of the Moplah territory. These facts were reported in order to show that the rising had been carefully planned by the leaders of the Khilafat movement, who for months past had been preaching a boycott of the British throughout the country.

The details of these reports are historically correct, but the fallacious inference is deliberately supplied by the Government, whose interest it is to mislead the population. The main object of the Government in spreading this false notion of the causes of the rising is to break up the newly-acquired unity in the fighting forces of the inhabitants of India. And the Government policy was shrewd, for all the nationalist papers, and especially those published by Hindus, were agreed in condemning the Moplahs, and in demanding that the Government should take such measures as would effectively prevent the recurrence of similar disasters.

Being personally acquainted with the Moplah country and the Moplah people, I was amazed to find that even *Pravda* had allowed itself to be fooled by these Governmental lies. Data collected from all the available periodicals, in conjunction with the current reports received during recent months from the area affected by the present rising, show clearly that it was, in the first instance, a peasant revolt directed against landlords and moneylenders. One point which should suffice to show that religious fanaticism was not the primary cause of the trouble is that the first victim of the insurgents was Khan Bahadur K. V. Chekkuty, a retired police inspector, landowner, and moneylender—a Mohammedan. Moreover, the Moplahs were just as fiercely incensed against Moplah landlords as against Hindu landlords, although the former belonged to their own race and religion.

We must also bear in mind that the insurgents had a special interest in burning the offices where the Governmental registers and the family archives of the native magnates (capitalists and landowners) were kept, thus destroying the legal evidence of the mortgages and other debts of the peasant population. The first action taken by the Moplah Swaraj (Home Rule organisation) was to issue a proclamation for the remission of taxation. This Moplah rising was but a continuance of the peasant disturbances which during recent years have occurred in various parts of India. In 1920 there was a peasant rising in Oudh (Northern India), when the insurgents adopted similar tactics to those of the Moplahs, and burned the houses of the wealthier natives. The main distinction between the Oudh rising and the Malabar rising is that the Oudh peasants were better organised. They had established a definite union known as Kishan Sabhas (Peasants' Union).

The word Moplah is derived from the Tamil word *mupala*, which means son-in-law. The story runs that long ago an Arab

friend of a local chief, having married a girl who was one of the latter's kin, became known as "the son-in-law," and that subsequently all the Arab settlers received the same name. At any rate, the Moplahs are the offspring of Arab warriors, who established themselves on the Malabar coast nearly one thousand years ago, but, of course, their Arab blood has become greatly mixed. There are about one million of them in all. They can be readily distinguished from the other Moslems of the region by their tall, slender, and well-built frames, and by their high-spirited, not to say, quarrelsome disposition. Moplahs are found in considerable numbers in only five of the thirteen taluks or districts of the Malabar coast, namely, in Walluvanad, Ponnani, Ernad, Calicut, and Wynaad. The chief town of Malabar is Calicut, the well-known seaport at which Vasco da Gama first landed in India in the year 1498. This is the leading commercial centre of the region.

In this part of India, social oppression is more extreme than elsewhere, and the terrible tyranny of the caste system is more conspicuous; for these reasons Christianity has made more headway here than in other regions of Hindustan. It is worth noting that among the Nair Hindus of Malabar a modified form of matriarchy still prevails. The area is predominantly agricultural, so that most of the population is directly dependent upon the soil for a livelihood. The members of what are termed the higher castes, those which have social precedence, are likewise the owners of the land. They thus exercise simultaneously a social and an economic domination over the poorer classes. There has been in Malabar an active movement against the injustices from which the poorer members of the population suffer; but, owing to the economic dependence of these latter, the victims of social tyranny have not been able to achieve any notable improvement in their condition. "After years of unhappy experience, the masses have become convinced that social emancipation is impossible to secure in the absence of economic enfranchisement," writes *Justice*, an anti-Brahmin daily newspaper of Madras.

The land in Malabar is in the actual possession of a class of persons known as Jenmis. They pay the Government a rent, the amount being arbitrarily fixed by the local authorities every ten years. Some of the Jenmis are Hindus and others are Mohammedans; but they all belong to the upper class. They sub-let the land in smaller lots to the cultivators. In most cases, indeed, there are several stages in the sub-letting process, so that by the time we reach the peasant who really tills the soil, three or four different persons have acquired an interest in the produce of his holding. Of course, by this disastrous system the amount payable in rent is continually enhanced, until at length the total falls with a crushing weight upon the head of the unlucky peasant.

The tiller of the soil has to devote most of his energies to paying these charges upon the land, so that there is but a narrow barrier between him and famine.

Besides the Jenmis, we have to consider another factor in the life of the Malabar peasants. I refer to the Kanomdars or money-lenders, whose power over the land is obtained by making loans at usurious interest (ranging from 100 per cent. to 700 per cent.), either

to the Jenmis or directly to the peasants. In some cases the Kanomdars buy from the Jenmis the right of sub-letting the land; the right thus acquired is known as the Kanom-leasehold-right. The Kanomdars, to whom landlord rights are transferred in this fashion, are nothing more than moneylenders. They are not peasant farmers at all. "To speak of them as 'farmers' is quite erroneous; it is only through the power of money that they hold sway over the land," writes *The Hindu*, of Madras, a nationalist daily paper. The Kanomdars began to emerge as a class about a century ago, at a time when wealth was accumulating in the hands of the intellectuals, the forerunners of the bourgeoisie in India. These intellectuals, who are numerous in themselves, though they form so small a proportion of the population, make money as officials, lawyers, doctors, traders, etc., and like to invest their savings in land. Indeed, since manufacturing industry is still comparatively undeveloped and is hampered in various ways, and since the interest on the Government loans is too low to be attractive, the land is practically the only field of investment. Such persons have become Kanomdars. They are eager to increase their capital by fair means or foul, and they try to squeeze the uttermost farthing out of the unhappy peasants.

It is obvious that the Kanomdars, as a superfluous and unproductive class, must exercise a disastrous influence upon the agrarian system of Malabar. In fact, they have helped to promote the economic ruin of the country.

Thanks to this abominable agrarian system, peasant revolts have been of frequent occurrence in Malabar. For the last seventy years, the Government has found it necessary to maintain a European garrison at Malapuram, and the first important rising occurred in the year 1836. This led to the passing of an agrarian law which was to protect the peasantry from extortion. In 1854, after another rising, the Moplah War Knives Act was promulgated, forbidding the Moplahs to manufacture or own the long war-knives, which were almost the only weapons obtainable. But in 1887 came yet another and very serious rising, when thousands of Moplahs were shot down. The insurgents had refused to surrender, feeling that the only choice open to them was between death by the bullet and death by slow starvation. The slaughter was followed by a Governmental enquiry, and subsequently a new law was promulgated, the Tenant-Right Act, which was intended to protect the tillers of the soil. None of these measures had any practical effect towards improving the situation of the exploited peasants, for the interpretation of the letter of the law was almost entirely in the hands of the lesser officials—natives personally interested in the system of extortion. Thus, the legislation was farcical. In 1900, when there had been further disturbances, another law was passed, the Farming Improvement Act. This did not pretend to give the peasant any economic security, but merely to safeguard him against eviction.

We have to remember that Malabar is almost exclusively an agricultural country, and that nearly all the population makes its living out of the soil. Ninety-nine per cent. of the Moplahs are poor peasants. The law of 1900 was advantageous to the Kanomdars,

and in a lesser degree to the sub-lessees. It did absolutely nothing to improve the lot of the working peasants.

The present troubles arose out of the fact that the Kanomdars were specially favoured by the Farming Improvement Act of 1900, and were planning to make themselves the sole lords of the soil. For this purpose a meeting of Kanomdars was held on July 18th, 1921, in the Walluvanad district of Malabar, a district largely peopled by Moplahs. The meeting took place at Tutakal, in the residence of N. P. Ahmed Kutti, a wealthy timber merchant, a Mohammedan. Eight hundred Kanomdars were present, both Hindus and Mohammedans. The chair was taken by a Hindu, K. Koru Nair, a noted lawyer of Ottapalam. A resolution was passed to petition the Government for a law to confirm the Kanom-farmers (!) of Malabar in their possessions. Bahadur M. K. Nair, a Hindu, retired Government official, Kanom-farmer and money-lender, member of the legislative council of Madras, was appointed to push the matter of the "Tenancy Bill" in Government circles. We must carefully note that whenever such persons use the term "farmer" and have it employed in legislative enactments they are referring to Kanom-farmers and not to the poor peasants. It is the contention of the Kanomdars that the legislation they propose is the only way by which the agrarian difficulties of Malabar can be overcome. The resolution adopted at this meeting was duly brought before the legislative council of Madras, and was favourably received by the Government, notwithstanding the vigorous opposition of the Jenmis and the more enlightened among the peasants. Although the law had not yet been put in force, the Kanomdars, confident of their coming success, had begun to exercise the expected rights, so that the patience of the oppressed peasants was at length exhausted. The outcome was the Moplah rising of August 19th, which has now become a matter of history.

The non-political character of the rising can be read between the lines of the report of a speech made by Lord Reading, the Viceroy, to a joint meeting of the Council of State and the Indian Legislative Assembly. I quote from *The Times* of September 6th, 1921: "The spark which kindled the flame was the resistance by a large and hostile crowd of Moplahs, armed with swords and knives, to a lawful attempt by the police to effect certain arrests in connection with a case of house-breaking. The police were powerless to effect the capture of the criminals, and the significance of the incident is that it was regarded as a defeat of the police, and therefore of the Government."

The actual facts were as follows: Since the hot-headed Moplahs had no other resource against the oppression practised on them by the Kanomdars and the Jenmis, they took the law into their own hands and burned some of their oppressors' houses at Tiruzangadi, a town in the Ernad district. When the authorities set the police in motion and mobilised a company of the Leinster regiment (the British troops stationed at Malupuram) to arrest the ringleaders, a mob of two thousand persons resisted the police and the soldiers, who were forced to withdraw. Certain fanatical

mullahs, such as Ali Musalier, Kunki Tangal, etc., seized the opportunity, with the aid of a few brigands, to raise the standard of the Khilafat movement for the overthrow of the Government.

These adventurers were in a favourable position to begin with, for they were able to seize firearms and ammunition from the recently evacuated police stations and military outposts of Ernad district, so that the British forces had to retreat. Moreover, the insurgents got possession of a sum equivalent to £40,000 from the strong-box at Malapuram.

While affairs were taking this course in the towns, the coolies on the outlying plantations jumped at the chance of retaliating for the grievances they had suffered at the hands of the European planters, and they killed a planter named Eaton. "The Englishman had time to fire only three shots from his revolver before being kicked to death by his own coolies." Another planter, Tippetts by name, "would have been killed but for the loyalty of his servants, who said, 'We have been with the Sahib for five years and can any coolie present point out one act of injustice on the Sahib's part?'" (*The Times*, September 5th, 1921.)

The nationalists and the leaders of the Khilafat movement declared Swaraj (Home Rule), and hoisted the green flag [the religious emblem of the Mohammedans], but the leaders were not able to prevent their followers from engaging in rapine and seeking immediate gain. Another official bulletin throws further light upon the agrarian character of the movement: "A local Moplah landowner, his son, and their retainers, numbering over 100, had a miraculous escape. A rescue party found them in the jungle, hiding from the rebels, who had already declared Swaraj (Home Rule) and published a proclamation remitting taxation." (*The Times*, September 5th, 1921.)

The Hindus suffered most from the wrath of the insurgents, not because they were of a different religion from these, but because most of the oppressors are Hindus. In the interests of the bourgeoisie, the Moplahs have been shot down by machine guns, but the Government has not succeeded in suppressing by this slaughter the revolutionary sentiments of the poor peasants and workmen of India.

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