



# DECLINE OF THE DOMINANCE: MYSOREAN INVASION AND DECLINE OF THE ELITE POWER IN MALABAR

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*Abstract:* The period of Mysorean occupation of Malabar which lasted from 1766 to 1792, was a significant event in the history of modern Kerala. The first phase of invasion was under Hyder Ali Khan and the second phase was led by Tipu Sultan. Their invasions witnessed to a period of fear and chaos in Malabar, specially for the higher strata of Hindus. Mysorean occupation resulted in the decline of the feudal political system in Malabar and many *Rajas*, feudal lords, and *Nair* soldiers fled to southern Kerala. A large number of the elites were converted to Islam and those who declined to conversion were deported or killed. It was reported that untold atrocities were inflicted on the upper-castes and their traditional rights and privileges were stripped off. This situation continued up to the Sreerangapattanam treaty in 1792 and the consequent restoration of the old feudal system.

*Index Terms* - occupation, *Mappila*, *Nair*, conversion, dominance

## INTRODUCTION

The Mysorean invasion on Kerala under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan during the second half of the eighteenth century decisively influenced the course of the later day history of Malabar. The political anarchy that had existed in north Kerala during this period helped the Mysoreans to conquer Malabar without facing any considerable resistance. Malabar represented a special situation where one group, the *Nairs*, stood as the most resistant opponent of the Mysore rulers, while another group, the *Mappilas* welcomed the Mysore army; the support extended by the former to the Mysorean army was a grace to Hyder Ali in easily subduing the local Hindu rulers. With the things came in their way, the Mysoreans backed by the *Mappilas* began to take revenge on their opponents particularly on the upper-caste Hindus. This paper looks into the role of Mysore rulers in putting an end to the age-old political supremacy of the upper-caste Hindus in Malabar.

The Malabar region in the 18<sup>th</sup> century exhibited a highly fragmented political structure, divided into dozens of semi-autonomous principalities or *nadus*, each governed by local chieftains known as *naduvazhis* or *desavazhis* who owed nominal allegiance to larger overlords. North Malabar, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, consisted of the *Nair* principalities of Kolathunad, Chirakkal, Kadathanad, Kottayam, Kurungod Nair and the *Mappila* principality of Cannanore. South Malabar was divided between the Zamorin of Calicut and the Raja of Cochin. As they were in opposition to each other whenever chances came up, they

did not hesitate to accept the help of conquerors in destroying their foes. The clashes that took place among the local rulers were intended to materialize their political ambitions.

After the disintegration of the Vijayanagara Empire, the Wodeyar Dynasty of Mysore became a prominent kingdom with Srirangapatnam as its capital. The last King of the dynasty, Krishna Raya, was overthrown by Hyder Ali Khan, his army chief who was stationed in Dindigal. Hyder imprisoned the royal family members in the capital and declared himself, the Sultan of Mysore. It is said that the first incursion of the Mysoreans into Malabar occurred in 1732 when they invaded the dominions of the Zamorin of Calicut at the invitation of the ruler of Palaghat<sup>1</sup>. The attack presumably had little effect. When The Zamorin annexed Palaghat in 1756, the Raja of Palaghat invited Hyder Ali Khan to help recover his lost possessions. It was at this time that Hyder interfered in the internal affairs of Malabar and sent an army to assist Komi Achan, ruler of Palaghat. However, the Zamorin settled the issue temporarily, by paying a large sum as indemnity to Hyder.

In February 1766, Hyder Ali again launched the campaign from Mangalore, motivated by demands for unpaid tributes from rulers like the Zamorin of Calicut and Kolathiri Raja. The immediate occasion for his coming was either a plea for help from the Ali Raja of Kannur who had suffered an attack by *Nairs*, or it was his need to establish a safe route to the friendly French port of Mahe<sup>2</sup>. It is clear that Hyder was happy to associate with the *Mappilas* in Malabar, and the latter in turn received him with a great and hearty welcome, about 8,000 *Mappilas* joining his armed forces<sup>3</sup>. The forces overran Kolathunad without resistance and subdued Kottayam and Kadathanad after brief opposition. The rulers of Chirakkal, Kottayam and Kadathanad sought English East India Company's help. But the Company force then was not in a situation to come to the rescue of them. Although they had agreed upon to assist the Chirakkal Raja, the factory adopted a neutral policy after making an agreement with Hyder Ali at Madayi on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1766<sup>4</sup>.

When the Kolathiri's palace at Chirakkal was seized by the army of Ali Raja, the former fled to Tellicherry with the members of his family, but the English East India Company refused to give him refuge. Consequently, he escaped to Travancore. The administration of Chirakkal was entrusted upon Ali Raja of Kannur by Hyder Ali. The *Mappila* army of the Ali Raja committed all possible atrocities against the people of the Kolathiri. They had particularly a vengeance against those people and the Zamorin of Calicut who had murdered more than six thousand *Mappilas* in this period in a conspiracy<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the army of the Ali Raja was moved by "desire of vengeance and the hope of recovering their losses at the expense of their enemies<sup>6</sup>. Hyder after overthrowing the Kolathiri arrived near the Dutch fort at Cannanore and gave orders to put to death all *Nairs* and Hindus who wore *kudumi*, but he issued special instructions to spare the Company's servants<sup>7</sup>.

Zamorin of Calicut, at this time, made all attempts to appease Hyder offering him wealth and valuable gifts but was rejected. Finding no other way, he also surrendered and sent his family members to Ponnani and committed suicide by burning his palace. Later his family took asylum in Travancore. When Hyder conquered the territories of Zamorin, he pursued a policy of iron repression in Malabar. The *Nairs* were not allowed to bear arms; his soldiers were ordered to kill all the *Nairs* who violated his orders. Many were taken as slaves and transported to Mysore<sup>8</sup>. The dethroned rulers of Kottayam, Kadathanad and Chirakkal also made a futile attempt to forge an understanding against Hyder Ali with the Tellicherry factory of the Company.

With the situation came in their way the Mysore army backed by the *Mappilas* began to take revenge on their opponents and the *Nairs* were the object of their special vengeance<sup>9</sup>. The frustrated *Nairs* of Calicut, Kadathanad and Kottayam, fretting under the heavy imposts of the conqueror, under the instigation of some of the members of the Zamorin family launched an extensive rebellion against the Mysoreans in Malabar. A contingent of the Mysore army was besieged at the banks of the river Ponnani by the rebels. On hearing the news about the rebellion of Malabar, Hyder rushed from Coimbatore with a strong contingent to Malabar and ruthlessly crushed the rebellion. To break their stubborn rebellion he is said to have conceived a plan to transport *Nairs* to uninhabited areas of Mysore, but less than 1,000 of the 15,000 thus transported survived the experiment<sup>10</sup>. Several *Nair* soldiers were killed and others escaped

to Travancore. The *Mappilas* associated with the invasion used the opportunity to express their pent-up resentment in violent form against both the persons and properties of the ruling *Nairs* and *Brahmans*<sup>11</sup>.

The outbreak of the First Anglo-Mysore War in 1767 diverted Hyder's attention and resources northward, interrupting the consolidation of Mysorean control in Malabar. During the absence of Hyder Ali in Malabar, the *Nair* rebels rose in revolt and they badly defeated the four thousand strong Mysorean army at Kottayam. Consequently, Hyder Ali had to reach at a truce with the rebels and he offered compensation for the *Nair* soldiers which was readily accepted. He returned the conquered territories to the *Rajas* of Kottayam, Kadathanad and Calicut on the condition that they would give him a fixed amount of annual tribute. Palakkad and Kannur were kept under Hyder himself. The Mysorean army thus was withdrawn from Mysore in 1768.

As the *Rajas* of Malabar did not give the agreed amount of tribute to Hyder, he once again attacked Malabar in November 1773. Zamorin had made no preparations to resist the attack and by January 1774 Hyder easily conquered Calicut and the royal family once again took asylum in Travancore. Following the Zamorin, the *Naduvazhis* of Malabar too surrendered to Mysore ruler. This time Mysore occupation of Malabar did not last long. As part of the Anglo-Mysore war, an English contingent under Major Abhington defeated *Mysoreans* under Sardar Khan. As a result, the company army freed the whole of north Malabar from the Mysore forces. Taking advantage of the situation, the *Rajas* of Malabar sought company's help and consequently they were reinstated. In the meanwhile, the army of the Zamorin was reorganized and they ousted the *Mysoreans* from south Malabar.

In 1782, Tipu Sultan succeeded Hyder Ali following the latter's death. The treaty of Mangalore in 1784 recognised Tipu's suzerainty over the territories of northern Malabar. During this time, large number of atrocities on the elite-Hindus were reported. Many of his victims were hung, even mothers with their children around their necks, others were dragged to death by elephants. No mode of execution was too terrible, no torture too great, to satiate his fiendish vengeance. Churches were plundered, and the roofs of all place of worship blown off whilst Hindu and Christian women were compelled to accept *Muhammadan* husbands. No Hindus were allowed to wear the lock of hair on his head. The rack and starvation were used as instruments of conversion and those obstinate unbelievers who refused to be convinced by the persuasive arguments were put to death. Many were killed, women and children enslaved, and others fled to Travancore. It is reported that in the first part of the eighteenth century "the *Mappilas* were much addicted to robbery and kidnapping the children of *Nairs*, whom they sold into slavery to the French at Mahe and the Dutch at Cochin.

In 1784, at the beginning of Tipu's reign, the *Mappilas* besieged and destroyed a Hindu temple at Manjeri. To keep the peace a large group of Tipu's soldiers attacked and overcame them.<sup>12</sup> But it was not possible then or later, to overcome by force the successful injection of the force in principle. Such activities had engendered a fierce and abiding hatred between the Hindus and the *Muhammadans*<sup>13</sup>. In 1788, Tipu issued a proclamation against *Nairs* directing them to be obedient and loyal with him<sup>14</sup>. He made assurances too that *Nairs* would be restored all their old rights and privileges only if they embraced Islam. In the wake of these decrees, thousands of *Brahmans* and *Nairs* fled to Travancore or to the jungle, while others resolved to fight to the end. Taking advantage of this proclamation, many *Nairs* got converted to Islam and but many took asylum in Thiruvithamkur.

At Kuttipuram, which functioned as the head quarter of the Kadathanad royal family Tipu's army surrounded an old fort where nearly 2000 *Nairs* were hiding in a bid to escape from the attack of Tipu's army. Subsequently, surrendering orders were issued that the whole of these unfortunates should be offered the alternative of becoming good *Mussalmans*, or, in case of non-compliance, that they should be banished to Srirangapatanam<sup>15</sup>. They reluctantly acquiesced in the former alternative, knowing well what the deportation meant. The next day, accordingly, all the males were circumcised, while both sexes were compelled to eat beef, as a proof of their conversion<sup>16</sup>. One of the principal victims of Tipu's revenge was the *Raja* of Chirakkal, who having been falsely accused of conspiring, was attacked and killed, and his body hung up.

In 1789, Tipu issued a further edict and directed people to embrace Islam and reminded of the consequence if they failed to abide by. This programme was undoubtedly put into effect at least to some degree, especially during the years 1788-89. In July 1788, an estimated 200 *Brahmans* were converted and forced to eat beef<sup>17</sup>. Members of *Raja* families in Nilampur and Parappanangadi were similarly treated. In 1789, the programme was extended to North Malabar and 2000 *Nairs* were forcibly converted to Islam in Chirakkal.<sup>18</sup> It is evident that Hyder Ali was not over involved with forced conversion but “in the case of Tipu Sultan there may be some force in the allegation that he converted some Hindus...forcibly in mistaken zeal...always aimed at high-caste Hindus”<sup>19</sup>. It was reported that the whole of country from one end to the other was devastated by fanatic Muslim hordes. The sword of the Quran was the alternative offered. Everywhere the Hindus were persecuted and robbed of their riches, their women and their children.....the *Mappilas* increased in numbers and influence, while the *nairs* diminished in importance<sup>20</sup>.

The new revenue system introduced by the Mysoreans weakened the firm hold and authority of the *jenmies* over the land<sup>21</sup>. The state directly started revenue collection which put an end to the oppression and exploitation of the ryots by the traditional landlords. It also gave a severe blow to the dominance of the higher-castes and deprived of their privileges. The ancient feudal principalities were stripped of their autonomy. The lands of the runaway landlords of Malabar were permanently given to the tenants who had earlier worked under them. The stoppage of the exemption given to the *Devaswam* land curtailed the socio-economic dominance of the elite-Hindus particularly the *Brahmans*. It was for the first time that the *Brahman* dominance over Kerala society, which had continuously existed for ages, was shattered.

The colonial report of Malabar in the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century noted that, because of Tipu's persecution in 1788-89 of the Malabar Hindus, many of the landlords, who were nearly all of that religion, were reduced to the necessity of relinquishing everything and of taking refuge in Travancore. William Logan notes that 280 *jenmi* families went to Thiruvithamkur who claimed ownership over the lakhs of hectors of land from Kasargod to Chettuva river<sup>22</sup>. During the Mysore occupation nearly 30,000 *Brahmans* along with their family with the support of Ravi Varma, a member of Kottayam royal family had fled to Travancore. William Logan argues that if the British had not come, the *Nairs* would have become a jungle tribe<sup>23</sup>.

The *Mysorean* occupation of Malabar led to a new awakening among the *Mappilas* and lower castes. For the historically marginalized and untouchable communities like the *Thiyyas* and *Pulayas*, the occupation initiated early steps toward social liberation and they gained a new sense of social security and confidence. Tipu used the state power for social reforms which was on the basis of humanity and rationality. His intention was to weaken the authority of the higher-caste Hindus who had hegemonic power in society. While he generously patronized Hindu temples and retained Hindu ministers, he simultaneously waged military campaigns driven by Islamic expansionism, resulting in controversial forced conversions and temple destructions, particularly in Malabar. Nevertheless, there are several historical evidences which prove that Tipu had tolerated the practice of Hindu religion within his own territory and became popular with all his subjects<sup>24</sup>.

When Tipu returned to Mysore, the chieftains of Malabar who had lost their powers to the Mysoreans began to organize themselves to recapture their lost territories with the support of the British. They returned from jungles and began to harass the Mysore forces stationed in their areas and to carry on depredations all round<sup>25</sup>. In the meanwhile Tipu was completely defeated in the third Anglo-Mysore war and he sued for peace. With the Treaty of Srirangapatnam in 1792, the British formed the Malabar District under the Madras Presidency and they allied with the displaced upper-castes to re-establish the traditional landlord system.

## Conclusion

The *Mysorean* occupation of Malabar, which lasted upto 1792, stripped the Nair militia and *Namboodiri* landlords of their traditional judicial and military powers. It gave the first and foremost blow against social superiority and cultural hegemony of the elites. Fearing the atrocities, thousands of *Nairs*, and *Brahmins* fled their homes, seeking refuge in the kingdom of Travancore. While causing damage to the privileged position of the elite-Hindus, the occupation simultaneously helped to empower the marginalised sections by providing them new opportunities. It can be argued that the *Mysorean* occupation of Malabar acted as a catalyst for social change by stripping the elite-Hindus of their supreme societal standing.

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