

Confrontation with Colonialism: Resistance from the Local Potentates of Malabar against Company State

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Abstract: There are so many examples in the history of India for the resistance movements against colonialism. Malabar was also a victim of such colonial legacy, the local potentates of this area including, administrative chiefs like Naduvazhies and Desavazies, spiritual leaders and merchant elites etc. were forced to participate in this confrontation due to their personal reasons. In the initial stage of European arrival, the local people of Malabar had maintained a cordial relation with them. No doubt, during the Mysorean dominance Company used to maintain friendly relation with local chieftains and the elites of Malabar to gain their support against the Mysorean rulers. At that same time Company also acted as the role of protector and financial supporter towards the local elites and they were jointly moved through mutual understandings. But later the increasing commercial and administrative motives of the European Company turned them from the status of the companion into a great enemy of the local potentates. When the local potentates realized the deceit of the British, they resisted with their teeth and nails against the Company. Unfortunately, such resistances and their voices were not seen in the history of Malabar written by British. Even the British were able to hide these counter voices in their writings; it is alive in the minds and the memories of the people of Malabar forever.

Key Words: Confrontation, Colonialism, Local Potentates, Company State, Moopan, Kanamdars.

Introduction

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the rulers of Malabar (especially the minor chiefs) and the British Company had accepted one another as trading partners. Obviously, Mysorean invasion and their dominance over Malabar was a major factor for their conclusion of mutual relations. But later the increasing commercial and administrative motives of the Company turned them from the status of their companion into a great enemy of the local potentates. The treaty of Sreerangapattanam signed in 1792 between Tipu Sultan and the British Company had played a vital role in the above mentioned transformation process. Because, through

this treaty they were able to acquire complete power of Malabar and the Company also decided to change their prevailing policy towards its people, especially to the local chiefs. When the local potentates realized the deceit of the British, they resisted with their teeth and nail against the Company. Unfortunately, such resistances and their voices were not seen in the history of British Malabar. So this article mainly tries to unravel the efforts and contributions of such personalities to confront British colonialism. As a part of that it tries to analyze the nature of the British relation towards the local potentates of Malabar in their initial stages and their changing characters in the following days. Besides, it also explains how the British became the prime enemy of local chieftains and their resistance mechanism against the British.

During the Mysorean dominance Company used to maintain friendly relation with local chieftains and the elites of Malabar to gain their support against the Mysorean rulers. To ensure that the Company acted as the role of protector and financial helper towards the local elites and they were jointly moved through mutual understandings. Without conducting a major battle against anyone of the native chieftains in Malabar, the Company succeeded to project its influence and authority in Malabar through their financial help.ⁱ Prior to the Mysorean dominance over Malabar the indigenous rulers used to exercise the customary right to rule the land. But during the Mysorean period the position of the most rulers were challenged and finally lost their territories. During the Mysorean domain in Malabar the relation between the Mysorean rulers and the chiefs began to decline, it was mainly due to their attempt to local authority and had refused an offer to their estates on pension.ⁱⁱ This situation was clearly exploited by the British, they tried to get the alliances of local rulers by promising their safety in future days and they also ensured the local Rajas would reinstate after the Mysoreans were defeated. Under this motivation the local potentates were forced to support the Company as their maximum and it was extended up to 1792. But later the British attitudes towards the natives were completely changed and it brought a new situation in Malabar. In return of their alliance the Company promised the raja's independence, but after the treaty of Sreerangapattanam, the rajas were reduced to mere revenue administrators of the British government and their sovereignty thereby negated.ⁱⁱⁱ Consequently, the cordial relation between the British and the local rulers were broken up. So when the rajas come back their territories to reassert their previous authority, they were not satisfied with new setups of the commissioners. The Governor General Cornwallis had decided not to grant independence to the Rajas of Malabar, contrary to

the agreement of 1790, but to place them under the direct administration of the British.^{iv} Moreover, the British officials also claiming legitimate authority over Malabar. The British followed the same strategy throughout India without any legal or moral base. This move is interpreted by some as strategy to achieve economic monopoly over the products of Malabar with the aid of political control.^v Thus through this attempt again the British Company had got a chance to prove their deceive character in Malabar as earlier.

Actually the British Company had decided to rule over Malabar just after handover from Tipu Sultan. But they faced some problems and soon they realized the fact that, it is impossible to continue the political as well as economic administration in Malabar without enough knowledge of the place. Not only this, the dispute between the Company and the local rulers and resistance from the chiefs had strengthened their reality. So they began to change their former decision and continue their administration with the help of local Rajas. Shortly after the suggestion put forward by Murdock Brown, the commissioners began to change their earlier project of administration of Malabar.^{vi} As a part of that, the commissioners were directed to make a temporary scheme of internal administration in Malabar, which might continue until the Governor General had sufficient knowledge of the province to warrant the introduction of a permanent system. So the local rulers retained their previous power and also continued their administration some more days. During this occasion the British had granted only the territorial sovereignty over their land but the right of revenue ultimately remained in the hands of British. On 22nd April 1792, the local rulers had retrieved their previous principalities; the Commissioners were in favor of maintaining the power of the rajas and leaving the administration of the country into their hands.^{vii} Definitely, it was the most suitable way to the British to control the agitated local rulers and chiefs of Malabar in that particular situation. Besides, to reduce the intensity of the resistance of the locals, the British started settlements with the locals of Malabar who were co-operate with them. The Bombay Commissioners began at Tellichery to effect settlements with the northern Rajas of Chirakkal, Kottayam and Kadathanad, who were in cordial relations with the British.^{viii} By concluding these types of settlements with the local Rajas, the British were able to domain the power of Malabar indirectly up to a certain level without any problems.

Gradually they began to change their nature towards the local Rajas, it was only after claiming a deep grip in the soil of Malabar. They tried to cut down some rights and privileges enjoyed by the Rajas and also nullify the legitimacy of the local potentates. This process was mainly done by issuing several laws and orders by the Company. For instance, the customs of Rajas and Lords accepting gift from the people on the occasion of *Onam* and *Vishu* were banned by the declaration.^{ix} Actually this type of practice was existed throughout Malabar and it also a clear indication of power that possessed by a local Chief. The basic criterion for the little kingdom model power structure in Malabar, which includes the pyramidal state structure, fortified villages and local rulers, politics equal rituals, exchange of gifts, traditional form of government, military, ecological and economic marginality of little kings, legitimating rule through rituals and lowest level of state structures.^x When the British continued such activities in Malabar, the rajas showed their dissents, because it was worst insult to their power and prestige. But they didn't get enough attention to their responses because the resources and men with them were inadequate to resist the British in that particular situation. So sometimes the Rajas were compelled to obey the terms and conditions of the treaty forwarded by the Company.

As a result of the above incidents, the late eighteenth century Malabar turned into the domain of the violent responses from the part of the native peoples, especially some local rulers and Mappila chiefs. Obviously, it created some difficulties to the British, especially for implementing their policies and strategies in Malabar. So, again the Company tried to introduce ample methods to prevent local resistances against them and they also create better future in Malabar. Cornwallis, the Governor General was anxious to introduce and establish a practicable system for their future government that shall be intended to prevent internal dissensions amongst the chiefs and to procure under a regular administration of justice, all advantages to the Company, whose circumstances were ample and the productions were capable of affording both in revenue and in commerce.^{xi} Besides, they also tried to get maximum resources of Malabar by any means to strengthen their dominance in Malabar. By claiming the resources of Malabar, the British also able to avoid foreign countries from trade competitions. Resistance by the local population, decline of agriculture and challenges from other European competitors impelled the British to formulate a policy on extraction of spices and related resources from Malabar.^{xii} As a part of that Cornwallis had instructed Abercromby, the governor of Bombay, to enquire into the present state of the country and to establish a system for the future government. He also promised to

offer two civil servants from Bengal in addition to the Bombay officials to investigate the resources and produce of the province and to report the best means of governing it.^{xiii} He (Abercromby-Bombay Governor) also instructed the commissioners in Malabar to adopt cautious dealings with local Rajas of Malabar. He had even directed them to follow a mild language with the local chiefs. But the policy of mild language was lasted only for a few months.^{xiv} From the above incidents we have to observe the fact that even the British tried to implement their dominance over the local rajas and chiefs of Malabar after the official political transformations, they were not able control Malabar in complete sense. So they tried to get the alliances and support from the same people without any favor to the Rajas and any losses to the British Company.

Even though the British introduced many strategies to get co-operation from the Rajas of Malabar, most of them were not satisfied with the present deeds of the British as earlier. Consequently, the local elites were tried to exhibit their dissatisfaction towards the mistreatment of the British through various resistances. The most important among these were the conflict between Pazassi Raja and the Company, Veervarma of Kurumbranattu and other Mappila local leaders like Elampilasseri Unni mootha Moopan and Chemban Pokker etc. According to the British records, there were at least half a dozen of prominent Mappila chieftains included in this group such as Athan Gurukkal, Chemban Poker, Elampilasseri Unni mootha Moopan, Hydroess Kutty and Unni Avaran.^{xv} The important activity centers of the rebels were Manjeri, Nilambur, Malappuram, Tirurangadi, Ponnani, Mannarkkad, Tamarassery, Pulavayi, Vettatunad, Cheranad and Eranad. Each persons or groups had their own reasons to turn against the Company, most of them fought due to implementation of new method of revenue appropriation by the British. The new revenue settlements and reforms introduced by the Company were highly unfavorable to the existing system of *avakasam* (customary rights), so the former beneficiaries of that right like local rulers and regional *Kanamdars* aspired to make a concerted effort to get rid off the menace of the British administration. The Zamorin was the first raja to express his objection to control land revenue under the terms imposed upon by the Malabar Commissioners.^{xvi} Similar voices of dissent were raised from the ruler of Palghat Kunji Achan and his people and many other local chiefs.^{xvii} Further, the British attitudes and actions towards the local rulers also a factor that culminated in the form of aggression against the British. One of the officials of the British Company observed that the actions and attitudes of Murdoch Brown (he joins the Company service in 1793) towards the locals rulers was

the chief incendiary of Malabar region. Even most of the British officials disliked the dubious activities of Mr. Brown; his relation with Governor Jonathan Duncan helped him continue his position in Malabar. It was realized that, in the correspondence with the local Rajas, Brown was not paying proper respect and it is believed that, it was a serious matter 'as contempt of the rajas, has always been one of the first seeds to revolt'.^{xviii} Definitely, such types of actions and attitudes of the Company towards the local rulers provoked them and they used to exhibit their opposition through small riots and uprisings. The immediate and striking manifestation of such feeling was seen in the form of uprisings led by Pazhassi Kerala Varma along with some other local chiefs like Kannothe Nambiar, Kaitheri Ambu, Kumaran Emman, Elambilaya Kunchan, Rairu, Menakoran, Paitholattu Nair, Moylan Kannachan Nambiar etc.^{xix} They were concentrated in the northern portion of Malabar, while Parappanad Raju, Unnimutha Muppan and Athan Kurikkal were leading figures in the south to pose fierce challenges against the British.^{xx} Among the above uprisings, the Pazhassi revolt was the most destructive to the British. The Joint Commissioner's Report submitted in October 1793, clearly point out that the supervisor Farmer had been directed to suppress the insurgency of the rulers especially of Wayanad under Pazhassi Kerala Varma Raja and other chiefs.^{xxi} Most of the cases two or more group's joint together and they fought against the British Company as their common enemy. Unni Mootha and Chemban Pokker published a declaration in an Ola to the people of Eranad and Valluvanad calling them for an open revolt against the British.^{xxii} But the British were very cunning about the unification of such local rulers and they tried to crash their unified attempts against the Company. For instance, during the uprisings of 1800-1805, there were some kind of understanding among Pazhassi Raja, Manjeri Gurikkal, Unni Moosa and others; but the effort of Wellesley was to see that a unified command between them was not established to separate the groups in South Malabar from the groups in North Malabar.^{xxiii}

As stated above major reasons for such types of disturbances in Malabar were the wrong decisions and implementations of British policies, especially in the land related issues. The prime problem after the British occupation in Malabar relating to land was the nature of ownership and their immediate interference brought a drastic changes in the traditional agrarian relations of Malabar. Through the new interpretations of existing agrarian rights in Malabar like janmam, kanam and pattam, the British were able to claim the ultimate power of the Janmis. According to report of William Logan, the Bombay authorities and afterwards the Madras

authorities recognized Janmi as absolute owner of his holding and free to take as big a share of the produce of the soil as he could screw out of the classes beneath him.^{xxiv} Not only had this, during the Mysorean period the Kanamdars in Malabar, mostly the Mappilas were possessed the absolute right over the land they held. But when Janmis were placed over their heads, their position began to be questioned and they also turned against the British, those who gave special status to the Janmis. The undisturbed possessions of land in Malabar under Mysoreans for nearly three decades by the Kanamdars, made them independent of the janmis and gave them absolute right over the land they held. But when janmis were placed over their heads and when janmis began to exact more money under the protection of the Company's government the Mappilas of South Malabar started to their life and death struggle to British government.^{xxv} The same conditions also suffered by the Moopans in Malabar, they were the revenue collectors of Mysorean rulers and they also possessed some other rights and privileges. But when the British Company decided to install its military establishments in Malabar, they recommended appointing Moopans under them as Mysoreans did. Unfortunately, their position limited to mere a revenue collector and all other rights and privileges were cut down by the British Company. Gradually, they turned against the British and become the part of the rivals of the Company. The authority of the Moopans was limited to the revenue collection and also to help the English officers by appraising the whereabouts of the refractory chieftains and rebels.^{xxvi} Like these, many groups challenged the British Company in their initial stages through a series of struggles. So, generally we can say that even in the first decades of British power after Sreerangapattanam treaty, was a period of atrocities, riots and rebellions to them. Even it was the fact; the British were not ready to accept such events under their domination. Not only the British, sometimes the native historians also denied such contributions of the local potentates against colonialism. Even the resistance from the local rulers towards the Company was too crucial; the historians of modern Kerala neglected such a heroic phase of anti colonial struggles partly because of their predilections or by the conceptual barriers.^{xxvii} Besides, it also proves that the British were not able to control the Malabar in their desired method. So they decided to change the control of Malabar from Bombay to Madras in the following days. Malabar province was transferred to the jurisprudence of the Madras Presidency in May 1800 with view to grapple with the rebels expeditiously.^{xxviii} Thus the British were able to claim their dominance over Malabar in the initial stages by hiding many real factors.

Major Local Chiefs Fought against the Company

Sl. No	Leaders	Concentrated Area
1	Unni Mootha Moopan	Nilambur
2	Chemban Pokker	Thirirangadi
3	Athan Gurikkal	Manjeri
4	Hydross Kutty	Ponnani
5	Unni Avaran	Vettatunad
6	Pazhassi Raja	Kottayam (Wayanad)
7	Veervarma	Kurumbranattu

Conclusion

From the above observations we have to conclude that the colonial experiences after the establishment of Company administration in Malabar prove that no considerable advancement was made possible during their initial time. The disputes and the resistance from the local rajas towards the Company were the major causes for such conclusions. It also proves that the inability of the British officials to collect the estimated revenue demanded and persistence of non-payment of revenue and the uprisings led by the local chiefs were the clear indications of difficulties faced by the British to establish their administration in Malabar. In short, even the power of Malabar transferred from Tipu Sultan to the British state; they hadn't enjoyed its fruit in full manner. But one thing is very clear that the British as well as the conventional societies looked these riots and resistances in the eyes of 'disturbances' of a microscopic minority natives, it may be due to the absence of any organizational structure, ideological plane or popular base, and so on.

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