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The Malabar Rebellion and M.P. Narayana Menon: Revisiting a secular nationalist

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Abstract

The Malabar Rebellion of 1921 represents one of the most contested episodes in the history of colonial India. While colonial narratives often portrayed it as a communal conflict, a closer examination reveals deeper agrarian and nationalist dimensions. Among its leaders, MP Narayana Menon occupies a unique space as a secular nationalist who bridged Hindu-Muslim divides and championed tenant rights against feudal exploitation. Popularly remembered as 'Mappila Menon,' his political life illustrates the complex interplay of class, caste, and religion in Kerala's anti-colonial struggle. This paper revisits Narayana Menon's role, examining his early life, tenant mobilization, alliance with Muslim leaders, participation in the rebellion, and his enduring legacy. It argues that Narayana Menon represented an underappreciated strand of secular, agrarian nationalism whose contributions remain vital for rethinking both the rebellion and Indian nationalism.

Keywords: Malabar Rebellion, Hindu-Muslim Unity, M.P. Narayana Menon, tenant movement, secular nationalism

Introduction

The Malabar Rebellion of 1921, also known as the Mappila Uprising, was among the most violent and controversial anti-colonial movements in South India. Taking place in the Eranad and Valluvanad taluks of Malabar, it began as a convergence of Khilafat, Non-Cooperation, and tenant struggles but quickly escalated into widespread conflict. British accounts largely portrayed it as a communal riot, obscuring its agrarian underpinnings. This paper seeks to foreground M.P. Narayana Menon's role in shaping the rebellion. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Menon directly aligned with Mappila Muslim tenants despite belonging to a Nair landlord family. His activism demonstrates a vision of secular nationalism that challenges conventional narratives of both Indian nationalism and the rebellion itself.

M.P. Narayana Menon was a person who participated in the Malabar Rebellion and emphasized the work of the tenants. He was born in 1887 in Angadipuram, Valluvanad taluk. His life was full of both successes and failures. As a Congress leader, he was able to convey the decisions of the Congress to the common people and, most importantly, to foster Hindu-Muslim unity and form Khilafat committees in all sectors. Although he was born into a feudal family, M.P. Narayana Menon led a simple life like an ordinary person. Because MP lived and interacted more with the Mappilas, he had a deep understanding of their language, culture, beliefs, sincerity, lifestyle, and prayers. Although he was born into a Hindu family, he participated in the Khilafat movement by wearing a lungi and shirt like the Mappilas, which is why he was also called 'Mappila Menon'.

Although M.P. Narayana Menon had many Muslim friends, his closest friend was Kattilassery Muhammed Musliyar. As a farmer leader, the MP formed an organization for the upliftment of farmers and to save them from the hardships they face. Through this organization, he removed feudal lordship over the peasants and introduced agrarian reforms. He placed greater emphasis on giving the common peasant and tenant population the same rights and freedoms enjoyed by the landlord leaders. As a Khilafat activist, he had expressed his disagreements with the British government, the wealthy leaders of the Congress, and the landlords. Through the Tenant Organization, he instituted many reforms for the common people. He focused on involving the common peasantry in the Congress-Khilafat movement. The MP was a man of character who would not bow down to anyone.

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A nature that stands firm in its position. Therefore, he did not give in even to the threats of the British. M.P. Narayana Menon was a person who was sentenced to life imprisonment for aiding the Mappilas.

Early Life and Political Awakening

M.P. Narayana Menon was born in 1887 in Valluvanad taluk, Malabar, into a prominent Nair janmi family. His social background positioned him to benefit from the feudal agrarian order, yet he chose to align with tenant grievances. Educated at Madras Christian College, he was deeply influenced by the Swadeshi Movement, Annie Besant, and VO Chidambaram Pillai. His legal training gave him exposure to tenant disputes, where he witnessed the harsh realities of exploitation under the janmi system. This early exposure radicalized his politics, positioning him as one of the few upper-caste leaders to stand with Mappila tenants.

Tenant Mobilization and Kudiyan Sangham

The agrarian crisis in Malabar stemmed from the oppressive janmi-kudiyan system, where tenants (kudiyans) faced exorbitant rents, evictions, and lack of security. Narayana Menon emerged as a champion of tenant rights by establishing the Kudiyan Sangham. This organization mobilized tenants, demanded reforms, and resisted arbitrary evictions. His efforts linked grassroots agrarian struggles with larger nationalist campaigns such as the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements. Unlike elite Congress leaders who hesitated to support militant peasants, Menon openly endorsed their struggle, which earned him both admiration and hostility.

During MP Narayana Menon's college education, the political background in India was very difficult. The Partition of Bengal in 1905 and Viceroy Lord Curzon's insulting statement led to nationwide protests. As a student, the MP was attracted by the slogans of "Swaraj, Swadeshi, and Freedom". He followed the leaders' call for Hindu-Muslim unity to the letter. He was given opportunities to study and discuss the freedom movement in India. Very few people attended the 1903 Congress conference held at Kozhikode. At the time when he started his practice as a lawyer in Perinthalmanna, he participated in the District Congress Conference held at Palakkad. He could well understand the conditions of the common peasants. The system of 'Birth' was prevailing at that time. It is a condition that asserts that the land received as God's gift belongs only to Namboothiris and Naduvazhikal. Oral lease was another practice that was still in use at that time. This was a practice of leasing land without any written Documents. Most of the civil cases were about land and lease. Therefore, the practice started in this situation and the MP could understand the condition of the tenants and farm workers. He voluntarily decided to join the tenant movement. Most of the cases were between Janmi and spectators. The Nayans were smart enough to win the case. MP used to collect huge fees from rich Janmis and Nayans. Within a short period of time, he was able to earn a reputation as a good lawyer. He realized that the establishment of a tenant organization was essential if the misery of the common farmers was to end. MP's first step into political life was through the tenant movement.

A striking feature of Menon's political life was his alliance with Kattilassery Muhammad Musliyar, a respected Muslim scholar. Their collaboration exemplified cross-communal solidarity, uniting Hindu and Muslim peasants under a

shared anti-colonial cause. This alliance directly countered colonial divide-and-rule strategies, which sought to depict the rebellion as a communal war. Through joint efforts, they built a secular nationalist movement rooted in agrarian justice. Their partnership remains a critical but underexplored aspect of the rebellion's history.

The MP was strongly opposed to such thinking. Mayengat Narayana Menon and Panangat Narayana Menon were two important childhood friends of the MP Narayana Menon. But because these two friends did not stand by him during his special crisis and opposed him, this friendship was lost. Another important Muslim friend he got later was Kattilassery Muhammad Musliyar. This friendship stayed lifelong. Muhammad Musliyar was a great person who taught us what friendship means. MP was a great student. MP passed all classes in average marks. MP's father and uncles wanted him to become a lawyer or a judge. And MP moved to Madras Presidency College after complete in higher studies. He was showing more interest in political, social and cultural field. Madras city was the center of swadeshi movement. The speeches of Vipin Chandran and Annie Besant, Satyamurthy deeply touched the MP's mind. MP had a Muslim friend in Presidency College. After passing secondary, MP joined Madras College for BA. He completed his BA from Madras Christian College and passed Law. In 1913, he started practicing as an advocate in Perinthalmanna Munsif Court. During his college education, MP Narayana Menon was interested in the field of art and literature. MP was also a kathakali actor and Dramatic actor. Although he passed his BA he did not have the conditions at home to continue his studies, the death of his father and the education of his brother Govinda Menon are the reasons for this.

Role in the Malabar Rebellion of 1921

During the rebellion, Narayana Menon took on a mediatory yet firm role. He attempted to prevent the uprising from spiraling into communal violence while maintaining an uncompromising stance against colonial authorities. His leadership and open defiance resulted in his arrest under martial law, where he was sentenced to life imprisonment. His refusal to sign an apology or seek clemency distinguished him from many contemporaries who sought early release. Menon's role illustrates the possibilities of secular, agrarian-based nationalism that resisted both colonial narratives and elite Congress hesitation.

He emerged as a political leader through the Tenant movement. He understood very well the condition of the common farmers of Malabar. The land laws in Malabar were unique. The land belongs to the Namboothiris and Naduvazhis, and they do not cultivate this land directly, but they use people from lower castes for it and sign contracts on the basis that they will be paid a certain amount. The contracts are usually for 12 years. There was a system called the verbal system back then, which meant leasing land without any writing or document. Similarly, if the landlord or the tenant asks for it, the tenant must vacate the premises. This was the place where the Koodiyans built their houses. The landowners and landlords had the power to evict tenants from the land. MP, who began his practice in such circumstances, understood the plight of the tenants and agricultural laborers very well. Moreover, being born into a Nair family, he had firsthand knowledge of this exploitative system. The MP understood that the government and landlords were not accepting their demands due to a lack of

organization on the part of the Mappilas and the tenants. The MP was convinced that it was necessary to establish tenant organizations to end the suffering of ordinary farmers.

The MP and his friend Kattilassery were two leaders who worked hard to bring Muslims and lower castes into the Congress. They founded the 'Kudiyan Sankat Nivarana Sangham' and integrated the activities of this group with the activities of the Congress. It later merged with the Kerala Kudiyan Sangham. When they were sure that the Congress would handle the tenant issue, the Mappilas and farmers were ready to join the Congress. It was at this time that the MP received a complaint that the manager was beating the tenants of the Zamorin estate. The complaint was that the manager had beaten the child to death. When he realized that no compromises were working, he convened a tenants' meeting at Angadipuram. He made the Mappilas and their grandchildren members of the meeting. This meeting was the first success of the MP's tenant work. The Koodiyan Sangh was established in Malabar in 1920. The hard work of MP and Kattilassery brought together all the Hindus and Muslims and unified the tenant movement and the Congress movement. The MP was able to instill in the people the idea that Congress is an organization for the poor. In 1919, MP Narayana Menon entered Malabar as a political act.

Imprisonment and Political Stance

Narayana Menon's imprisonment marked a defining moment in his career. For over a decade, he remained incarcerated, refusing to yield to colonial pressures. This uncompromising stance enhanced his reputation among peasants but led to marginalization within mainstream Congress politics. Gandhi and other leaders often regarded militant agrarian struggles with suspicion, leading to Menon's historical under-recognition. Nevertheless, his example of resistance resonates as a testament to principled political conviction.

The British government thought that it could use prohibition and imprisonment to control the growing popular power. On February 5, 1921, the British announced that any public meetings held in the taluk would result in criminal action. The ban was imposed on the grounds that "the series of Khilafat meetings being held in Eranad taluk are not only against the government but also against the Hindu landlords. Variyam Kunnath Kunjahammed Haji, Madhavan Nair, K Gopala Menon and other Khilafat leaders were banned from convening public meetings and speaking at them. The main center of the Khilafat movement was Tirurangadi. Pookottur, Ponnani Manjeri, Tanur, and Tirur were other important centers. Atakoya Thangal, Ali Musliyar, K.M. Maulavi, K.P. Kunji Poker Haji, etc. were the important leaders of the Khilafat in Tirurangadi. The first state session of the Congress was held in Ottapalam on April 22 and 26, 1920. During the Congress Khilafat Conference held in May, Kattilassery Muhammed Musliyar, Muhammed Abdurahman, and M.P. Narayana Menon traveled to Eranad and Valluvanad taluks as part of their campaign. The police beat up Khilafat volunteers and others for no reason.

Legacy and Historical Significance

Despite his central role, Narayana Menon remains an overlooked figure in both nationalist and Kerala historiography. His epithet 'Mappila Menon' reflected the deep trust he earned among Muslim peasants. Unlike leaders who sought compromise, he envisioned a secular, class-

based nationalism that transcended communal divides. His work anticipated later agrarian reforms in Kerala and provided a template for cross-communal cooperation. Reassessing his legacy not only reclaims an erased history but also offers lessons for contemporary debates on pluralism and agrarian justice.

Conclusion

The Malabar Rebellion has often been reduced to a communal confrontation, but figures like M.P. Narayana Menon reveal its deeper agrarian and nationalist character. His life underscores the potential of Hindu-Muslim unity, the centrality of tenant struggles, and the possibilities of secular nationalism in colonial India. By refusing to compromise, Menon left behind a legacy of courage and conviction. Revisiting his role not only enriches our understanding of the rebellion but also provides insights into the challenges of pluralism, agrarian justice, and secular politics in contemporary South Asia. M.P. Narayana Menon was a prominent leader in the Malabar Struggle of 1921. He started his service as a Congressman and later became a very important figure in Kerala history. He was known as a prominent lawyer and political thinker. M.P. Narayana Menon was the backbone of the national movement in Malabar. He worked day and night for Hindu-Muslim friendship. He tried to educate the people of Malabar to resist the British occupation they were experiencing. Through the tenant organization, he instituted many reforms for the common people. The MP was a man of character who did not bow down to anyone. He was a man who stood firm in his position. That is why he did not give in even in the face of British threats. MP Narayana Menon was a person who received up to life imprisonment for aiding the Mappilas. Although he was born into a feudal family, MP was known for leading a simple life like an ordinary person. Because he lived in close contact with the Mappilas, MP had a deep understanding of their language, culture, beliefs, sincerity, lifestyle, and prayers. His role in the Malabar Rebellion and his contributions to the Malabar Rebellion are all discussed. The history of MP represents a crucial phase in the Malabar Rebellion.

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