

The Wagon Tragedy, Madras Mail and Other Allied Matters Related to Peasants Struggle, 1921

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Abstract: *The Wagon Tragedy of November 1921 remains one of the most painful episodes connected with the Malabar Rebellion and British colonial rule in India. One hundred prisoners were confined in a closed railway goods carriage and transported from Tirur to Podanur, where severe lack of air caused the deaths of 70 people. The incident drew strong public criticism and raised serious questions about the treatment of Indian prisoners under colonial authority. This article places the tragedy within the wider political and social conditions of Malabar, including harsh tenancy practices, land disputes, colonial taxation, forced evictions, and growing resistance among Mappila peasants. It also examines the public debate surrounding the inquiry into the deaths and the colonial government's decision to provide compensation of three hundred rupees to the families of those who died. Contemporary newspaper discussions questioned whether such compensation could answer for the loss of human life and exposed unequal colonial attitudes toward Indians. The article further connects the tragedy with the Non-Cooperation, Khilafat, and tenancy movements, which brought political and agrarian grievances together in South Malabar. Seen in this wider setting, the Wagon Tragedy was not merely a transport disaster. It became a lasting symbol of colonial neglect, human suffering, and resistance during a troubled period in India's struggle against British rule.*

Keywords: Wagon Tragedy, Malabar Rebellion, Mappila prisoners, British colonial rule, Indian independence movement

1. Introduction

Wagon tragedy also known as Wagon Massacre, was an incident which occurred during the Malabar rebellion against British colonial rule in India that led to the deaths of 70 Indian prisoners. In 1921, a rebellion against British colonial rule by Mappila Muslims broke out in the Malabar District of British India. Following the rebellion, 100 Mappila prisoners who had been taken into custody were ordered by the colonial authorities to be transferred from the Malabar Coast to Podanur as the jails in the Malabar District were overcrowded. Thousands of Mappila prisoners were transported to other regions of British India during and after the rebellion via train, though they were typically transported in open-air carriages in order to prevent suffocation.

However, for unknown reasons, the 100 prisoners (who were being transported in November of that year) were sent to Podanur in a closed train carriage (Madras Mail) (Wagon 1711) by the sergeant and transport officer in charge of their detention and transfer. On 19 November, they were moved into the carriage and the train set off from Tirur Railway Station at 0715 pm, for Podanur. Air soon ran out in the carriage and several prisoners began to die due to asphyxiation. By the time the train arrived at the Podanur Junction railway station at 1230 am on 20 November, the carriage was opened by local authorities, who discovered that 64 prisoners had died.

The 36 surviving prisoners were taken to a nearby hospital, where a further six died of their injuries, bringing the total death toll up to 70. A prisoner later described his experiences on the train while it was in transit: "we were perspiring profusely and we realized that air was insufficient and we could not breathe. We were so thirsty that some of us

licked the perspiration from our clothes. I saw something like gauze over the door with very small holes so that no air could come in. Some of us tried to put it away but we were not strong enough

Independence Movement

When news of the incident came out, there was a public outcry in British India at the colonial authorities over their perceived negligence. Several prominent Muslims dispatched telegraphs to British colonial officials in Delhi, including the Earl of Cromer, who demanded an investigation. The British responded by opening an inquiry into the deaths, which eventually found the carriage manufacturer, transport officer and sergeant negligent in sending the prisoners to Podanur in a closed carriage instead of an open-air one but they were all acquitted. The incident ultimately contributed to an increase in support for the Indian independence movement. A memorial to the incident was subsequently constructed at Tirur.

The price of a Moplah is three hundred rupees

It is not clear whether the names and details of the 100 dead human beings who were pushed into the luggage van 1711 of the Maratha-South Indian Railway on 19 November 1921 were clearly recorded before that. The severe criticism that arose in India and abroad led to the publication of the NAPP Commission of Inquiry report.

Since the findings of the Napp report were likely to be discussed in the public, it was announced that compensation would be provided to the relatives of those killed in the wagon incident even before the report was released. The discussions in the Madras Legislative Assembly intensified the public debates that had arisen in the society. As the national public sphere expanded through the non-cooperation movement at the national level, the British government had to engage in defensive activities. It was as

part of this that the idea of compensation arose. The Manorama, which was published on 31 March 1922, raised the argument that compensation should be provided to those who lost their lives in the military hunt in Malabar. This newspaper wrote that the British government was responsible for these deaths. The Tamil newspapers also discussed the process of consoling the relatives of the killed even before the report was released. Swarajya Napp report, published on 27 April 1922, sharply criticized the non-publication of the report. The prison authorities stated that even if these prisoners had not died, as indicated in the report, their relatives would not have received any further assistance from them. It was because it was certain that torture equivalent to the killing of a car would be carried out. The newspapers wrote that the British government could not escape the responsibility of the destruction of 70 human lives. Some newspapers raised the relevant question of what measure was used to calculate the loss without publishing the report. At that time, the news had already come out that the dependents of the deceased prisoners would receive a compensation of three hundred rupees each.' The Swadesamitra, a newspaper of Calcutta, published the details of the wagon incident by quoting the Basmati newspaper of Calcutta, distributed on May 3, 1922. The gist of this news was whether it would be possible to compensate each family for the death of 70 prisoners as a result of the wrong policies and deliberate actions followed by the

Madras Government by giving them 300 rupees. The question raised by this news was whether the price of one of the poor people of India is three hundred rupees? Before the report was published and the culprits were identified, the colonial government announced that the price of a Malabar man was three hundred rupees in 1921 by announcing the compensation. The discrimination between Indians and British foreigners in India was discussed through this compensation news. At the time of the wagon massacre in Malabar, the issue of not providing fans and ice for cooling to British army officers stationed in Karachi during the summer had caused a great controversy. When read in conjunction with this, it can be understood that the killing spree against the prisoners in Malabar was only one of the great atrocities that the Indian-origin soldiers had to endure during the colonial period.

The prisoners who died in the wagon were from various places. Most of them were from Thrikkalagode, Mambad, Kuruvambalam, Perur, Payya Nadu, Punnappala, Neelampura and Chermalassery.' According to the documents related to this incident, the list of the deceased from various places is as follows.



Photo above memory of wagon tragedy constructed at Tirur, Malappuram District, Kerala.

List of Persons Who Were Loaded in the Carriage During 1921- Wagon Tragedy

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1) Ellikkal Hydru Coolie work | 11) Mankathodi MoideenHaji |
| 2) PuthiyaraKal Koyassan Timber Merchant | 12) Peruvan kuzhi kutty hassan (small shop) |
| 3) Kuttithodi Koya Kutty teashop | 13) Peruvan kuzhi Veeran " |
| 4) Akkara Veettil Kunnappally Achuthan Nair | 14) Parachottil Ahamed Kutty Musliyar. |
| 5) RiSakkil palathil Gold Smith Unnippurayan | 15) Madukkariyan Kathli Agri - |
| 6) Cholakkaparambil chettippichu Coolie | 16) Arikkuzhiyan Saidali Coolie |
| 7) Meledath Sankaran Nair Agriculture | 17) Manikkattavan Unni Moideen |
| 8) Pulakkatthodi Moideen Agriculture | 18) Keengadi Mammadu |
| 9) Mankarathodi thalappil Hydru (Tea shop) | 19) Moozhkal Hassan |
| 10) Vallikkapatta Mammed (Tea Shop) | 20) Kooppakkunna Ahamed |
| | 21) Kooppa kunnan Mootha |
| | 22) Kooppa Kunnan Abdulla |

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- 23) Kooppa Kunnancheriya moyi
- 24) Kooppa Kunnan Kunhali
- 25) Manikettavan. pocker Kutty
- 26) Polakkal Hydruman
- 27) KuppakkunnanValiya UnneenHaji
- 28) Asari Thoppiyitta Ayammad
- 29) ChakiripparambanAlavi
- 30) VayalpalayilVeeran
- 31) Panakkad Marakkar
- 32) Vadakkeppat Kunhayammad
- 33) OrakkottilEnadhi
- 34) Koorithodi. Yusuf
- 35) Puthanveetil Kunhahammed
- 36) Kallethodi Ahammed
- 37) Peringodan Abdu
- 38) CheeranputhurKunhayamu
- 39) AthanikkalMoideen Haji
- 40) ParayanPalliyalilKunhayamu
- 41) KallankinattungalMuhammed
- 42) Panangodanthodi Ahammad
- 43) PunayanPalliyalil Saidalavi
- 44) MadathilAyammadkutty
- 45) Konkot Moideen
- 46) PeringodanKadir⁹
- 47) Kerakkottil Ahamed
- 48) Kolakandathil Moideenkutty
- 49) Appamkandan. Ayamutty
- 50) KuttappilakkalKoyamu
- 51) PoolakkalthodikaKunhayamu
- 52) Erasseni palliyalilAli
- 53) Konkot Cheriyan Moideen
- 54) Tharakkuzhiyil Eni
- 55) Melethiyel Kunhala
- 56) Valayal thodi Kunhayan
- 57) Mankavil koomath Ahamed
- 58) Thekkath Alavi
- 59) Melethil Valiya Moideenkutty
- 60) Melethil cheriya Moideenkutty
- 61) Kolli thodayi Korakkottil Avaran kutty
- 62) kori Parambath Abdurahiman
- 63) puthen Peedikakkal veeran
- 64) Perumpalli Kunhi Moideen
- 65) Erukku Parambam Saidali
- 66) Thattan Thoppiyitta Ayamad
- 67) Thekkethil Moideen
- 68) Thazhathil kutty Hassan
- 69) Thekkethil Moideen
- 70) Veluthogedan Kunhayamu

2. Behind the Rebellion

When the British established the Malabar district in 1792, following the collapse of Tipu Sultan's Mysorean regime, they introduced colonial private property and taxation laws that entrenched local landlords (Janmis) as the absolute landowners. Previously, in Malabar's agrarian economy, landlords were co-proprietors with Kanakarans (middle-caste land supervisors) and Verumpattakarans (lower-caste/Muslim cultivators), who had customary rights to one-third of the agricultural produce but no right to evict tenants. Tipu Sultan's reforms had established direct land settlements with tenants, reducing the power of Naduvazhis (supralocal chiefs) and local Nair chieftains. However, under British

rule, the Mappilas, lower-caste Muslims in southern Malabar who had previously experienced some relief from the aristocracy's oppressive social relations, found their situation reversed.

"The growing Mappila peasant discontent in the southern Malabar hinterlands, such as Eranad and Valluvanad, began to solidify through the growing tenancy movement of the late 19th century. They organized local anti-landlord protests, using tactics such as non-cooperation and social boycotts against upper-caste Hindu landlords."

Notably, the colonial property laws shifted the revenue burden onto peasants, leading to arbitrary rent hikes and frequent evictions. New taxes, flawed revenue surveys, and land over-assessment sparked widespread, sometimes violent, protests. Heavy tolls on traders in interior Malabar worsened conditions for traders and middlemen. This fuelled growing resentment against the British and upper caste Hindu landlords. Consequently, land issues, including forced evictions of tenants by Janmis with colonial support, prompted responses from the local Muslim clergy. Traditional intellectuals such as the Musliar, Qazis, and Ulama helped foster an anti-colonial temperament in the region, with teachings from figures such as Veliyamkod Umar Qazi and Sayyid Alavi Thangal.

The growing Mappila peasant discontent in the southern Malabar hinterlands, such as Eranad and Valluvanad, began to solidify through the growing tenancy movement of the late 19th century. They organized local anti-landlord protests, using tactics such as non-cooperation and social boycotts against upper-caste Hindu landlords. Historian K. N. Panikkar observed that the passionate speeches of local Mappilas, rooted in their experiences of misery under the feudal order, had a greater impact at protest meetings than those of urban intellectuals. Furthermore, local tenancy associations helped build solidarity among peasants against the Janmi landlords. However, Mappila insurgent actions before the 1921 movement were localized, limited and discontinuous, with only 351 rebels involved in 32 incidents between 1836 and 1919. Many of these uprisings involved small groups of Mappila peasants attacking Hindu landlords, British officials, and even fellow Mappilas who collaborated with the colonial regime and local feudal authorities.

3. Conclusion

In the early 20th century, the anti-colonial nationalist movement gained significant support among the Mappila tenant cultivators and small farmers. This surge in support was largely driven by Gandhi's efforts to link the Congress-led anti-colonial Non-Cooperation movement with the Khilafat movement within British India that aimed to restore the Ottoman Caliph to his previous position as the figurehead of the global Muslim community following the breakup of the Ottoman empire by Britain and its allies after the First World War. In southern Malabar, combined with tenancy issues (e.g., high rents and the constant eviction of tenants by Janmis with state support), an unparalleled unity of Hindus and Muslims drove the joint Non-Cooperation-Khilafat momentum.

The struggling Mappila peasantry engineered a strategic alliance with anti-colonial and anti-landlord political platforms (e.g. Kudiyaan Sangham's and Indian National Congress) from 1916 onwards. Notably, Khilafat conferences urged those over 21 years of age to join the Indian National Congress and fight for Swarajya (self-rule) and the restoration of the Ottoman Khilafat. At Congress party conferences in South Malabar, such as the Manjeri Conference on April 28 and 29, 1920, resolutions were passed with similar demands. The joint banners of the Non-Cooperation, Khilafat, and Tenancy movements in South Malabar angered the colonial state and upper-caste Hindu landlords, leading to punitive actions against the peasantry and agricultural workers.

On August 1, 1921, Vadakkan Veetil Mammad, the chief accountant of Chinnanunni of the Nilambur Kovilakam (royal household), was dismissed after becoming secretary of the local Khilafat Committee. Mammad's demand for his rightful dues led to a lawsuit. Further police intervention in favour of Nilambur Kovilakam, alleging Mammad for stealing a gun, escalated tensions. Many believed that this was a conspiracy attempt to tame Mammad and weaken the Khilafat movement.

Mammad's incident acted as a trigger point, leading to an urgent meeting on August 21 in the small town of Pandikkad. There, local leadership, mainly popular Muslim clergy of the region, took charge of active mobilization against the feudal-colonial nexus. For instance, Chembrasserai Thangal and Variyam Kunnath Kunjahammad Haji were tasked with coordinating efforts in the southern sub-district unit or taluk of Eranad in the Malabar district, while Ali Musliar was assigned specifically to the town of Tirurangadi in Eranad, and Seethikoya Thangal took responsibility for the Valluvanad taluk. This rallying of leadership set the stage for the widespread rebellion that followed.

On August 26, 1921, the Mappilas fiercely fought the British in the Battle of Pookkottur after influential landlords urged the district administration to deploy the army. The battle resulted in the death of over 300 Mappilas and several British soldiers, including Commander Lancaster.

Keywords: Wagon Tragedy, Malabar Rebellion, Mappla Prisoners, British Colonial Rule, Indian Independence Movement.

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