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STATE FORMATION AND RELIGIOUS POLICY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MALABAR UNDER TIPU SULTAN

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ABSTRACT

The eighteenth century witnessed major political transformations in Malabar as Mysore, regional ruling houses, local elites, and European powers competed for territorial and commercial influence. Tipu Sultan's campaigns in Malabar formed part of Mysore's wider attempt to establish a centralized and militarily sustainable state. This paper examines state formation and religious policy in Malabar by focusing on political integration, revenue administration, local resistance, and the treatment of religious communities. Tipu's policies have generated sharply contrasting historical interpretations. Some accounts emphasize forced conversions, destruction of religious institutions, deportations, and severe military repression, whereas other interpretations emphasize political rebellion, fiscal interests, and evidence of religious patronage elsewhere in the Mysorean state. The paper argues that Malabar's experience should be situated within the broader dynamics of eighteenth-century state formation. Religious policy cannot be isolated from military and political circumstances, although evidence of coercive religious practices must also be acknowledged. A comparative reading of contemporary, colonial, regional, and modern historical sources provides a more nuanced framework for understanding Tipu Sultan's rule and its consequences for Malabar society.

Keywords: State formation, Malabar, Tipu Sultan, Mysore, religious policy, political integration, Nairs, Mappilas, revenue administration, eighteenth century

I. INTRODUCTION

Eighteenth-century Malabar was characterized by political fragmentation, commercial competition, and changing regional power structures. The region contained several political authorities, including the Zamorin of Calicut and other local rulers and chiefs, while European commercial powers maintained coastal interests. The rise of Mysore under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan introduced a new territorial power into this political environment. Malabar became important to Mysore because of its agricultural resources, maritime connections, strategic ports, and position in relation to British and other European interests. The Mysorean conquest consequently formed part of a larger struggle over territorial sovereignty and economic resources.

Tipu Sultan's state-building efforts reflected wider developments in eighteenth-century South Asia. Regional states increasingly sought centralized revenue systems, standing armies, bureaucratic institutions, and stronger control over local elites. Research on Tipu's administration emphasizes the movement toward centralized fiscal institutions and direct revenue extraction rather than reliance exclusively on powerful intermediaries. This transformation was particularly significant in newly conquered territories such as Malabar, where Mysorean officials attempted to reorganize existing political and economic relationships.

The religious dimension of Mysorean rule has produced enduring controversy. Some historical accounts portray Tipu as a ruler who employed religious coercion against Hindus and Christians in conquered territories. Other historians have argued that the evidence must be read within the context of military resistance and state consolidation. The record of Tipu's support for Hindu temples, employment of Hindu officials, and correspondence with the Sringeri Math has been used to challenge the idea of an entirely uniform policy of religious persecution. Neither set of evidence can simply be ignored.

This paper examines Tipu Sultan's rule in Malabar through three themes: the formation of Mysorean state authority, the restructuring of political and economic institutions, and the relationship between religious policy and state power. The objective is not to produce a simplified characterization of Tipu Sultan but to examine how different forms of evidence explain different aspects of his rule. The paper also recognizes that Malabar was not a passive geographical space. Local rulers, Nairs, Mappilas, Christians, merchants, and other

communities responded to Mysorean policies in different ways. State formation was therefore a contested process involving both central authority and local agency.

II. MYSOREAN STATE FORMATION AND POLITICAL INTEGRATION IN MALABAR

State formation under Tipu Sultan involved the extension of centralized authority into territories previously governed through diverse political arrangements. Malabar presented a particularly challenging environment because authority was distributed among rulers, chiefs, landlords, military groups, and local institutions. Mysore's attempt to impose a more centralized system therefore altered existing political relationships. The state sought to make local administration more directly accountable to Mysorean officials and to reduce the autonomy of intermediary powers.

Revenue administration was at the center of this transformation. Tipu's wider administrative system aimed to increase direct state control over revenue collection. Research on Mysorean governance describes the replacement or weakening of local tax-farming intermediaries and the creation of central fiscal institutions. In Malabar, this meant that taxation could no longer be treated simply as a local matter controlled by traditional authorities. It became part of a broader state-building programme.

The political consequences were substantial. Local rulers and elites whose authority depended upon control over revenue and military resources had reasons to resist Mysorean integration. The removal or reduction of their privileges threatened both their political status and economic position. Resistance therefore emerged from multiple sources. The Mysorean state interpreted such resistance as rebellion against sovereignty, while local communities could interpret Mysorean intervention as an attack on established rights.

Military power reinforced administrative integration. Tipu maintained a substantial military establishment because Mysore faced repeated conflicts with the British and their allies. Malabar's strategic location made military control particularly important. Roads, forts, ports, and supply lines had to be protected, while rebellious areas had to be brought under control. The resulting political system combined civilian administration with military enforcement.

The complexity of local resistance is illustrated by the involvement of different religious communities. Historical accounts note that Tipu's forces confronted Nair resistance as well as

resistance from Mappila Muslims. This evidence is important because it shows that religious affiliation did not produce a single political response to Mysorean rule. Some Muslims could resist Mysore, while some Hindus could cooperate with the administration. Political interests therefore intersected with religious identity.

The state-building process remained incomplete and unstable. Rebellions repeatedly challenged Mysorean authority, while British military pressure increasingly restricted Tipu's ability to maintain territorial control. Nevertheless, the attempt to integrate Malabar represented a significant experiment in centralized eighteenth-century state formation. It demonstrated the possibilities of bureaucratic and fiscal centralization but also the difficulties of imposing a uniform political system upon a region with deeply established local institutions.

III. REVENUE, SOCIETY, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

Economic control was essential to state formation. Malabar possessed valuable agricultural resources and commercial connections, making it an attractive region for a state seeking to strengthen its fiscal base. Mysorean authorities attempted to establish more direct control over revenue and reduce the autonomy of local intermediaries. This process affected landlords, cultivators, merchants, and political elites differently. It therefore had consequences throughout the social structure.

Revenue systems in Malabar were closely connected with customary rights. Landholding was not merely a matter of economic ownership; it involved obligations, social status, and political authority. When Mysorean officials attempted to alter revenue arrangements, they consequently interfered with established relationships. The resulting conflicts cannot be interpreted only as disputes over taxation. They were also struggles over political legitimacy and control of rural society.

Tipu's administrative reforms elsewhere in Mysore demonstrate his preference for written rules, salaried officials, and closer central supervision. The administrative structure separated different responsibilities and sought to prevent provincial officials from becoming autonomous power centers. Applying such principles to Malabar represented an attempt to transform a complex regional political economy into a more standardized fiscal system.

Commercial considerations also influenced Mysorean interest in the region. Malabar's ports connected the western coast to Arabian Sea commerce, while commodities such as pepper had major commercial importance. Control over the coast could therefore strengthen Mysore's economic and strategic position. State formation was consequently linked to commercial competition as well as agricultural revenue. This helps explain why Malabar remained important even when military resistance made administration expensive.

The social consequences of these changes were uneven. Groups that benefited from older political arrangements could experience Mysorean centralization as a loss of privilege. Others could potentially gain from a more standardized administrative system if it weakened oppressive local intermediaries. Historical evaluation must therefore avoid treating Malabar society as uniformly opposed to Mysore. Different communities and social groups had different relationships with the new state.

Administrative centralization also generated new forms of political dependence. Officials appointed by the Mysorean government became responsible for revenue collection, policing, and the implementation of state orders. Their authority derived from the central government rather than hereditary local status. This changed the balance between central and local power. However, because Mysorean rule in Malabar lasted only for a limited period and was repeatedly disrupted by conflict, the long-term institutional effects were uneven.

The transformation of local institutions thus formed an important part of Tipu Sultan's state-building programme. The attempt to centralize revenue and administration represented a significant departure from decentralized political arrangements. Yet the process generated resistance because political institutions were embedded in social and economic relationships. The Malabar experience demonstrates that state formation was not simply a matter of creating new offices; it involved renegotiating the distribution of authority, revenue, and privilege throughout society.

IV. RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES, COERCION, AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL INTERPRETATION

Religious policy in Malabar must be examined through the evidence concerning Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. The region contained a diverse religious population with long-established institutions and political relationships. Mysorean military campaigns affected different communities in different ways. Accounts of the period contain evidence of

conversions, deportations, destruction of religious buildings, and other coercive measures, particularly during periods of rebellion and military confrontation.

The strongest claims concerning forced conversion come from accounts associated with Mysorean campaigns in Malabar and from later colonial histories. Some sources describe the conversion of sections of the Nair population and the displacement of people who resisted Mysorean authority. Such evidence cannot simply be dismissed because it appears in sources hostile to Tipu. At the same time, historians must evaluate the circumstances in which individual accounts were produced and the political purposes they may have served.

A different body of evidence demonstrates Tipu's interactions with Hindu institutions. Scholarly research records his correspondence with the Sringeri Math and references to his patronage of Hindu temples. Other research cites grants or endowments to Hindu religious institutions during his reign. This evidence complicates any claim that Tipu followed an identical religious policy toward all Hindu institutions across all territories.

The distinction between state policy and wartime conduct is therefore essential. A ruler may support a religious institution in one political context while employing coercion against members of the same religious community during rebellion. Similarly, military destruction of a religious building can have political, strategic, economic, or religious dimensions. A historical interpretation should establish the circumstances surrounding each event rather than automatically assigning one motive to all actions.

The role of Muslims in Malabar further complicates the picture. Mappila Muslims were not uniformly aligned with Mysorean rule, and historical accounts describe Mappila resistance that was violently suppressed. If religious identity alone determined Tipu's policy, such episodes would be difficult to explain. They instead suggest that political allegiance, rebellion, and state authority played significant roles alongside religious identity.

Historiography has therefore produced competing interpretations. Some scholars emphasize Tipu's Islamic political identity and evidence of coercion, while others emphasize his administrative pragmatism, Hindu patronage, and the political circumstances of the Malabar campaigns. Modern historical analysis increasingly emphasizes the need to compare Mysorean, British, regional, and institutional sources. The available evidence does not justify ignoring coercive episodes, but neither does it support treating every administrative or military decision as evidence of a single religious policy.

A historically grounded interpretation consequently recognizes multiple dimensions of Tipu's religious governance. He was a Muslim sovereign who used Islamic political language and whose campaigns produced coercive religious consequences in Malabar. He was also a ruler whose wider administration included Hindu officials and whose government maintained relationships with Hindu institutions. The challenge for historians is to explain this apparent contradiction rather than simply selecting one side of the evidence.

V. CONCLUSION

Tipu Sultan's rule in Malabar represented an important episode in the formation of centralized political authority in eighteenth-century South India. His government sought to incorporate Malabar into the Mysorean state through administrative reorganization, revenue control, military power, and the reduction of local political autonomy. These policies reflected wider transformations in Mysore, where centralized fiscal institutions and salaried officials were increasingly used to strengthen the state.

The process of integration encountered considerable resistance. The established political structure of Malabar involved rulers, Nair elites, landlords, religious institutions, and other local authorities whose interests were affected by Mysorean intervention. Resistance therefore emerged from political, economic, and social factors. The participation of both Hindu and Muslim groups in opposition to Mysorean authority indicates that the conflict cannot be reduced to a single religious confrontation.

Religious policy remains a particularly complex aspect of the period. Evidence exists for coercive conversion, displacement, and attacks on religious institutions during the Malabar campaigns. At the same time, evidence from other parts of Tipu's state records his support for Hindu officials and religious institutions, including his correspondence with the Sringeri Math. These materials demonstrate that his religious relationships were historically varied and cannot be represented adequately through a single generalization.

The study of Tipu Sultan's Malabar policy therefore requires a state-formation framework that incorporates administration, revenue, warfare, religion, and local agency. Mysorean rule attempted to create a more centralized political order but encountered persistent resistance and ultimately lasted for a limited period. Religious identity influenced aspects of the conflict, yet political sovereignty and economic control were equally important. A critical reading of diverse primary and secondary sources can therefore move the study beyond

polarized portrayals and toward a historically contextualized understanding of state formation and religious policy in eighteenth-century Malabar.

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