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## Subversive Saints: Engagements of Ba-Alawi Sufis in Anti-Colonial Struggles

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### ABSTRACT

#### KEY WORDS:

Ba-Alawi Sufis-  
Malabar- Sayyid  
Fadhil- Sayyid  
Alawi- Mappila  
Outbreaks

Ba-Alawi Sufis are those people who migrated from southern part of Yemen across the Indian Ocean regions during the course of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As part of it they migrated to Malabar too. Ever since the Muslims of these region availed themselves the opportunity to understand spirit of Islam which practiced in the Islamic world. In the first half of the eighteenth century Ba-Alawi Sufis influenced the socio-cultural life of Mappilas by engaging in social activities as well as composing remarkable and reformative literary works. There are many documentary evidences that substantiate, many Ba-Alawi Sufis maintained themselves as a significant segment of Malabar population with their socio-cultural engagements. Ba-Alawis relatively small in numbers persisted to infiltrate into Mappila Culture in all its aspects especially in anti-colonial struggle and other philosophical essays endeavor to challenge the Colonial administration. Amongst them Saiful Bathar written by Sayyid Alawi and UddathulUmara by Sayyid Fadhil Ba-Alawi are worth mentioning which stirred up anti British feelings among the Mappila Muslims. An investigation into the history of Ba- Alawi literature help us to understand anti British engagements of Ba-Alawi Sufis. No attempt to write a systematic and complete history of Ba- Alawi Sufis interventions in anti colonial struggles in Malabar seems to have as yet been made by any scholar. This paper tries to look at their engagements in anti-colonial struggles.

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#### Introduction

British administrators exerted heavy pressure upon the Malabar people, which was beyond their capacity to endure. The most important was that the government

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placed the burden of tax upon the poor peasants and landlords without considering the fertility of lands. The landlords collected the same tax from all tenants without considering their economic capacity. In the same manner, the natural calamities, which took place in Malabar at certain intervals, were also not considered by the officials. This became a real burden upon peasants of the Malabar who bore the brunt of the British administration in Malabar. Against this background, many revolts took place in Malabar. The important amongst them are the Pazhassi revolt and Kurichia revolt, which rocked the British power in Malabar.

Besides these, many Mappila revolts also posed problems to the British administration in Malabar. In the first decade of nineteenth century, British reappointed old landlords in Malabar, who had fled from Malabar during the attack of the Tipu Sultan on Malabar. So Mappila leaders to characterize this as strict measures directed against them. By propagating these ideas in the minds of Mappilas, Hadhrami Sayyids stirred up anti British feelings. The Mappilas thought that the reappointment of nobles and landlords who had controlled them before Tipu's invasion should result in loss of their freedom in the land as before. All these led the Mappilas to fight against the British. Moreover British people occupied all authority in Indian Ocean trade by the second half of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Therefore, the Mappilas, majority of whom were traders, lost their freedom in Indian Ocean trade. This was also yet another reason for the Mappila animosity towards the British. Till that time the trading groups from among the Mappilas very freely engaged in trade networks of Indian Ocean.

### **Ba-Alawi Sufis Opposition to British**

The advance of British created a serious impediment for them and only the rich traders could sustain their authority in trade through making alliances with the British. The Keyies and Koyas are the best examples for the Mappila traders who engaged in the trade networks of Malabar even after the British advance. So many Mappilas were left in the field of agriculture and these farmers were levied a great burden of taxes. During this time a group of Sayyids from Hadhramaut (Sothern part of Yemen) migrated to Malabar who commonly known as 'Ba-Alawis or Ba-Alawi Sufis' who were remained in Malabar with the support of the Mappila Muslims.

They allied against the British when the Mappilas intended to fight against them Ba-Alawi Sufis motivated the Mappila Muslims by writing many books and poems. The most important amongst them were Saiful Batthar and Uddathul Umara. These two texts motivated the Mappilas to fight against the British. The presence of these books itself posed a big problem for the British rulers in Malabar and they were cautious of

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the outrage of Mappila Muslims. On some occasions, the Mappilas were ready to do whatever that was directed by their leaders.

In some instances, Ba-Alawi Sufis themselves fought against the British and land lords who exploited the local Mappila tenants. None of these conflicts were communal violence but for the livelihood of Mappilas as well as the for the reduction of the revenue burden. According to K.N. Panikkar, Mappila Muslims did not intrude into any temple to demolish the statue or make it unclean. If that was the ultimate aim, they had many chances for it. On all these occasion, they kept a policy of peace and adjustment. Some of the uprisings were thus characterized as peasant rebellion. In one example, Mappilas allowed the family of Vadakkottil Namboori and his dependants to flee from their house.

Though Ba-Alawi reached Malabar with the help of British, after a short span they turned against the British policy in Malabar. Ba-Alawi supported Tipu Sultan's invasion of Malabar. They helped Tipu introduce new land reforms in Malabar. These measures from the part of Ba-Alawis made them immediate opponents of British in Malabar. According to K.N.Panikkar, Ba- Alawi played a vital role in creating an anti British feeling in the minds of Mappila Muslims. There are many reasons behind the Hadhrami opposition to the British. The most important amongst them was that the British dominated the Indian Ocean trade network and tried to push them away from trade. This policy caused the economic decline of their home country (Yemen), which flourished with their remittances.

Secondly, British had already occupied parts of Yemen and posed many problems to the natives of the Yemen. They organized the native people into warring groups and made them enemies to each other. Through this bifurcation, they exploited the local Yemen people and used the port of Aden for their trade purpose in Indian Ocean. Moreover, they made a trading hub at Aden, which helped them to control all trade in the different parts of Indian Ocean. At the same time Hadhrami people were pushed into penury by the internal conflict and contradictions fomented by the British at all parts of Yemen. Thirdly, British administrators in Malabar always tried to make them move away from Malabar by creating many allegations against them. At the first instance itself, British understood that the existence of Ba-Alawi Sufis along with the Mappilas would be a challenge to the British powers in Malabar. Therefore British officials tried to implement new measures against the Hadhrami Sayyids after the revolts, though some were minor. As a best example, one can see the measure taken against Sayyid Alawi after a minor conflict in Malabar. The measure is as follows

in a letter which is sent by Collector Connolly to the British government that the “main reason behind all conflicts in Malabar is the motivation of the Sayyid living in Thirurangadi”. So they find the only remedy is to move him away from Malabar.

Thereafter, the British could control and rule Malabar very easily. These stringent measures against Hadhrami Sayyids strengthened their enmity against the British. As Sufi scholars, they got the support from a majority of Mappila Muslims who were already against the British due to the burden of revenue and other stringent policies. So Hadhramies could challenge the British powers in Malabar even when they were on the opposite side of the Zamorin. The Zamorin was only a puppet in the hands of British in those days, therefore there was not much problem for Hadhramies from the part of the Zamorin.

To demonstrate their enmity to the British they wrote many books and essays against them. Through these essays they could attract the Mappilla community to oppose the British. When the books became a challenge to the British, they prohibited all writings, which spit venom against the British. On this ground Hadhrami Sayyids distributed it to the Mahals of Malabar very secretly. According to Mahmood Panangangara the books Uddathul Umara and Saiful Bathar played a vital role in propagating anti-British feelings in the minds of Mappilas. The attempts of British administrators to banish some of the Ba-Alawis, culminated in failure due to the mass support from the Mappilas.

However, they could expel Sayyid Fadhl by cheating him on the pretext of providing a chance to offer Hajj. After he set out from Malabar, they closed all the way to return from Makah. This antagonized Mappilas against the British especially in the minds of remaining Hadhrami people. So they hatched conspiracy to take revenge against the British powers in Malabar. Finally they decided to kill Connolly who was then collector of Malabar then.<sup>18</sup> The Mappilas did it very easily because he lived in his residence without much protection. William Logan says that the expulsion of the Hadhrami Sayyids were the vital reason for the assassination of the Connolly. William Logan writes “various causes have been suggested for the murder of Mr. Connolly, but the most probable of them seem to be the ruffians, who were men of bad character, were exasperated at the orders of Mr. Connolly subjecting them to resistant in the jail and that they had resolved, probably at the suggestion of some outsiders, on avenging the banishment of Sayyid Fazal to Arabia”.

## **Ba-Alawi Responses to the British**

Ba-Alawi Sufis were already very acceptable among the Mappilas as they were Sayyids. The Sayyids were considered as the descendants of the prophet and they were known as Thangals. They got respect and veneration from Mappilas during the course of history. Many historians claim that the word thangal is a translation of Sayyid and similar them thengal is using in south East Asia to denote Sayyids .

When the minds of Mappilas were turned against the British because of pressure that was exerted upon them, Ba-Alawis also joined with them. The main burden upon them was the land revenue. Besides this, the exploitation of the British officials and their attempt to implement the unpopular policies strengthened the animosity of Mappilas against the British. The land revenue levied upon the Malabar people was very high. Moreover British officials did not allow any concession to the tenants on any occasion even if there happened a natural calamity. Moreover, they levied tax without considering the fertility of the land. Many revolts was took place in the nineteenth century in Malabar.

In the same manner, British exploitation in all aspects of social, cultural, and economic life of Malabar also paved way for the enmity against the British. In terms of economy they exploited the nature to realize their dreams. In terms of religion they indented to polarize by distorting all the problems in Malabar as a problem of Hindu and Muslim. All these factors provided ground for the Hadhramies to mobilize the Mappilas against the British in Malabar in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the writings of Hadhramies also motivated them to oppose British. By capitalizing on all these opportunities Hadhrami Sayyids called for a movement against the British. The Mappila community responded to the call of Hadhrami Sayyids. Year after year, the opposition of Mappilas increased because of strict measures taken by the British against them without concluding any reconciliation treaty with them. Moreover, British supported the landlords and their exploitation.

This activity led many Mappilas to fight against them. On this occasion, Ba-Alawi Sufis gave leadership to them by giving advice and direction to fight against the British. As a response, British quelled the Mappila movements raised against them in different parts of Malabar. To awaken the Mappila Muslims the need of fight against the British, Ba-Alawi Sufis wrote thought provoking books, which distributed to all mahals in Malabar and asked the Imam to translate it to the common people before Juma speech. It was very strong warning to the common people if they keep away

from the anti colonial conflicts. Through these warnings Ba-Alawi Sufi could gain the support of many Mappilas with mass support.

Their writings and blessings caused for many revolts and rebellions in Malabar in later years. correspondence of Moploh Outrages very detail writes on the involvement of Tiruwangady Thangal (Sayyid Fadhl Ba-Alawi) in the Mattannoor uprisings with his blessings and motivations the texts reads as follows “there is no priest in the north who has ever been suspected of sanctioning these lawless, revengeful and fanatical outbreaks so frequent among the disciples and in the country within the influence of the Thiruwangady priest; and of which he is believed throughout the country to be the patron. The circumstance then that the nucleus and majority of recent gangs visited this priest under the most unusual circumstances before breaking out, at once connects this priest with the recent outbreak, and adds the force of full conviction to a position of which no moral doubt has for years been entertained, viz., that this priest by his sanction and blessing inspires with fanaticism and deludes with quasi pious incentives revengeful wretches bent on murder, and often as in this instance impelled only by motives of an interested and private nature”.

Saiful Bathar one such book written written by Sayyid Alawi against the background of Muttichira revolt (1840), in Arabic language in 1841. Its full name was Assiful Bathar Alaman Yuvafi l Kuffar va Yataqiduhum Mindoononillahi va Rasoolihi val Mumineena val Ansar which means, a warning against those who obey the directions of non Muslims and depended upon them instead of the Allah”. This book comprised of eight questions and it answers. Majorities of questions are about the colonial invaders. The author gives strong messages against the British. The copy of the book was distributed to all mahallus in Malabar. British officials possessed some copies and destroyed them because they were afraid of this book.

Besides these, this book warns the Mappila on the seriousness of the crime of respecting the colonial officers. Sayyid Alawi quotes many Quranic verses and Hadiths to strengthen his claims. As he is a follower of the Shafi Madhab he explains the answer to the entire questions in terms of Shafi Imam’s opinion. The first question is what is the Islamic view of a person who migrated to an Islamic country, which was annexed by the Christian powers and lives there acting upon Christian law and order. Sayyid Alawi gave the answer that it was compulsory for all Muslims to recapture it. Only migration without trying to recapture the islamicc country was a crime. On the other hand, those who migrated to the Christian conquered lands and obeyed their law and order were not real Muslims.



Uddathul Umara is the another important writing against colonialism and imperialism written by Sayyid Fadhl Pookoya Thangal in the last years of first half of the nineteenth century. The full name of this Arabic text is Uddatul Umara val Hukkam Li Ihanathil Kaffarathi va

Abadathil Asnam. It translated as preparation for the leaders and judges to belittle the idols and non Muslims. This was also considered as an important reason to banish Fadhl from Malabar. In 1851, Malabar district collector, H.V.Connolly prohibited the book in Malabar. The Collector believed that the text paved the way for the Mappila rampage in Kolathur and Manjeri. The text was sent to Mahals which and were as anti British. This book was read publicly at all mosques in Malabar and this was supposed to have been increased the feelings against the British.

Nevertheless, some scholars claim that the book was written only after Sayyid Fadhl's exile from Malabar. This would not be a correct claim because the book was banned in Malabar district in 1851. The exile happened only in 1852. However It was republished after his exile from Egypt. Moreover, all the scholars agree unanimously that the last chapter was the largest and had been written from Malabar itself. In all pages, he wrote that Qathilu adaallahi,iinal jannathu Thaththa Dilali Suyooof meaning” fight against the enemy of Allah, because the heaven is under the shadow of the sword”. This word itself attracted the dedicated Mappila Muslims to fight against the British as opined by the scholars.

It is believed that the Mappila offenders unleashed many revolt just after this work was published and distributed in mahallus of Malabar. At the end he promulgated the promise of heaven to all those who participated in the war and warned end in hell to all those who turned away from the holy war. Therefore, majority of Mappila Muslims were attracted to this war and participated with wholehearted support because they were that much dedicated to Islam. The last chapters were based on history. He interpreted the history of Persia, Java and China to teach the lesson from their disintegration in fighting against the colonial powers.

## **Conclusion**

One can see that the interventions of Ba-Alawi Sufis in anti-colonial struggles were very evident in the history. Though their active participation were absent, they motivated the Mappila community to fight against British by their speeches and writings. In all these speeches and writings warned the Mappila community that, those who did not participate in anti-colonial struggles would be out of Islam. More over they used the Friday congregation to deliver the messages to the common people. This gained a

mass support from different parts of the Malabar and broke out many revolts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As the British found that the Ba-Alawi Sufis were the motive behind the revolt they tried to punish them. However, due to the mass support of Mappilas British could not take the revenge from the Ba-Alawi Sufis. Finally, British could expel Sayyid Fadhl, one of the prominent Ba-Alawi Sufi and the fugitive of early Mappila revolts, to Mecca in the pretext of giving opportunity to offer Hajj. when Fadhl left for Hajj british g overnment closed all the ways to return to Malabar.

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